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THE CHANGING ASPECTS OF SETTLEMENT
IN CENTRAL SOMERSET FROM THE
ELEVENTH TO THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences (Geography)
in candidature for the
Degree of
BACHELOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The study covers an area in north-west Somerset within the hinterland of Bridgwater, that is, within a radius of approximately fifteen miles of the town. Developments in settlement patterns, economy and social conditions are reviewed between the late eleventh and early seventeenth centuries. The region was largely agricultural; but the economy was influenced by local industry and markets and by ports on the Severn estuary and on the existence of navigable rivers. Published works dealing with developments are examined in the context of England as a whole and for Somerset in particular. The discussion is summarised under four sections dealing with (1) the historical geography at Domesday; (2) changes to the early fourteenth century; (3) the late fifteenth century, and (4) the situation in the early seventeenth century.

The processes of change move progressively from a feudal economy and social structure to a capitalist society. The themes of changing elements in the space economy consider (1) the control of land use, (2) developing industry and trade, and (3) effects on social conditions. Extensive land reclamation and the woollen textile trade produced considerable wealth but the prosperity was not spread generally throughout the whole area, or amongst all members of the the population. Money from wool and cloth, coinciding with the fourteenth century failure of demesne farming, encouraged the rise of larger independent farming units. The sale of monastic property gave further opportunities to those with capital to acquire estates.

New spatial structures were formed. In northern and eastern areas prosperous farms with mixed produce emerged and these were owned or rented from landowners or merchants. Newly-built houses and churches indicated wealth. In the hilly southern and western districts small holdings continued to exist, with less apparent growth, and large estates were formed from previous monastic land or waste. Trading and industrial centres constituted a third sector of the local economy. Overall, socially and economically,

divisions between social classes were increased - especially between those with land and wealth and the landless poor.

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24th July, 1987

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study covers a part of northern central Somerset roughly thirty miles from east to west and fifteen miles from north to south. Figure 1 shows the main limits of the region, including modern settlements and the present day courses of the major rivers. The area consists of a basin of low ground containing ridges and isolated hills and the lower courses of rivers which run north and west to the Severn estuary. Higher ground forms a boundary on three sides; the Mendip Hills to the north and north east, the Blackdown Hills to the south and the Quantocks to the west; but the lower slopes of these hills adjoining the lowlands are an integral and important part of the scene.

In this study the theme of changing elements in the space economy of this part of Somerset from the eleventh to the early seventeenth centuries is developed. Three factors are of particular interest:

- (1) the control of land and resources,
- (2) the development of the rural and trading economy and
- (3) the consequent changes in the social structure

Spatial aspects of man's activity and the change through time are examined and explanations for the developments and events are put forward and discussed in the following chapters. The discussion is centred on a framework of four major chronological divisions;

- (a) the situation at 1086,
- (b) developments from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries,
- (c) during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and
- (d) the conditions obtaining in the early sixteenth century.

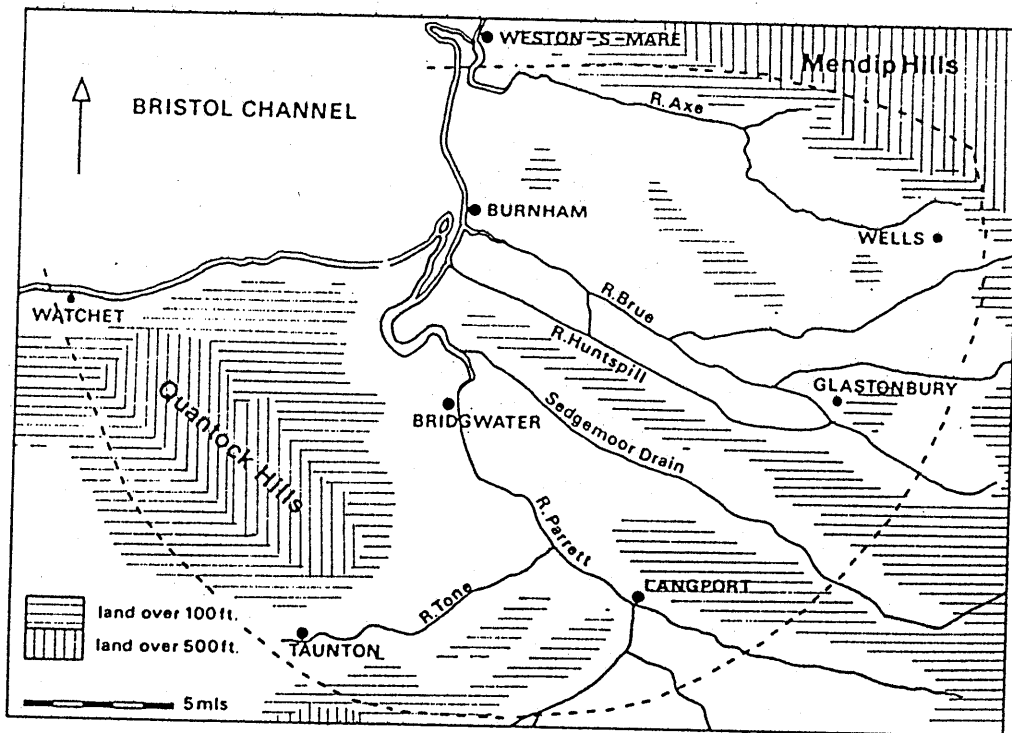


Fig. 1. The study area

The tools of historical geography have been used; maps or spatial distributions, models and hypotheses. In dividing the discussion into periods the dangers of simple cross sections at a given time must be borne in mind: changes are continuous and interrelated. In a small scale study the amount of data for quantitative analysis is limited; so hypotheses have been proposed and conclusions suggested and fields for possible future research indicated. It has been observed by some writers that a restricted territory of study or a single situation can be an appropriate setting in which to begin to concentrate on those particular aspects which may have been neglected in more widely-based historical and analytical investigations (Hobsbawm, 1980, 3-8). It is now generally agreed that more use should be made of a range of sources which may throw light on local conditions and attitudes (Baker, 1979, 560, Prince, 1980, 230), and here an interdisciplinary approach has been made using evidence from archaeology, local history and local geology. The social aspects of human activity and the class struggle for control of power and production (Baker, 1979, 565-67) seem to have particular application to this part of southwestern England; also the rise of a capitalist economy and the middle class (Hilton, 1973, 150-80).

At the time of the Domesday Survey, large estates held by the Crown, the abbey, the Bishops of Wells and Winchester and various Norman lords occupied much of central Somerset. Ecclesiastical control of large blocks of land continued until the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century. Estates in the Quantock Hills in the western part of the area were, as a general rule, smaller and more scattered. The area has always (or, until the last few decades of the present century) been predominantly rural, with

agriculture the largest industry. In 1086 only seven small Saxon 'burhs', or fortified towns, were recorded. The lowlands, in particular, presented problems for agriculture and were subject to flooding (and these problems continue into the twentieth century). From the thirteenth century onwards drainage and reclamation works in these lowlands and on the hill slopes were organised or approved by the landholders, particularly the monastic authorities, resulting in more and improved land for agriculture and settlement. This was seen especially in the valleys of the Axe, Brue, Parrett and Tone rivers and on the southern slopes of the Mendip Hills near Wells. These reclaimed lands were, and still are, suitable for livestock. Large flocks of sheep were noted in 1086 and in abbey and estate records later in the Middle Ages, indicating the economic importance of the production of wool. Also, from the fifteenth century, cattle and dairy produce was a feature of the region.

Access to the sea by way of navigable rivers, tidal for considerable distances inland, and through small river ports, was a factor of major importance. By the fourteenth century the interest of Crown and landholders in trading profits had resulted in the founding of new towns and river ports - a total of more than twenty in central Somerset. With improvements and weirs instigated by the monastic authorities, the waterways provided a valuable means of transport to Wells, Glastonbury, Langport, Ilchester and Taunton. A number of small seaports were active along the north coast of Somerset until the early twentieth century, because the rivers and the Severn estuary gave easy access to Bristol, South Wales, Ireland and the Continent. Markets proliferated and the sale of agricultural produce and wool brought substantial profits to landlords, village workers, merchants and middlemen.

After the mid-fourteenth century, changes took place in the patterns of landholding and settlement as in the rest of England. The system of demesne farming declined and estates were divided and leased. Holdings vacated because of the plague gave opportunities to those who wished to enlarge their farms or to acquire new tenancies. In Somerset a change in the pattern of landholding and use resulted from these factors and also from the profit to be made from wool and woollen cloth. Sheep pasturing required less labour; independent farmers could use profits to extend their holdings and enclose further parcels of land. Taunton and Wells became textile centres and, later, the cloth industry diffused out into the countryside. Villages such as Dunster and Croscombe experienced growth and prosperity. From the fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries stone houses and newly built churches and church towers were constructed in many towns and villages, particularly in the lowlands and river valleys. These buildings are an indication that there was sufficient wealth in these communities for such purposes and that some places and people, at least, were doing well. Bridgwater, the largest and most prosperous port from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, traded in textiles, wine, wood, iron, salt, grain and cattle. Not all parts of the region, however, appear to have been equally prosperous and a lack of building or rebuilding in some remote places away from trade routes may indicate a less favourable situation - or, perhaps, simply a lack of the need or desire to rebuild.

The social effects of the changing patterns of landholding can be seen in the rise of the yeoman class, prosperous farmers, independent, and able to practice mixed arable and livestock production. Land and property in the rural areas was purchased by

wealthy merchants and clothiers from the textile towns and villages and from the port of Bridgwater. On the other hand, loss of employment and of grazing rights gave rise to complaints of rural poverty. By the sixteenth century, Acts of Parliament tried to deal with the problems of landless vagrants. A social division arose in the towns between the rich merchants and traders and a working class employed in the textile and other local industries and in the ports.

Even in an area as small as this now studied, variations can be seen in the developing space economy. In the western part, in the foothills of the Quantocks, much enclosure had taken place by the fourteenth century. Here, it had for many centuries been the custom on the small holdings to operate mixed farming systems. In the lowlands, open fields remained until the eighteenth century in some villages, for example, Westonzoyland which was a corn growing area. Yet again, along the coastal strip generally, traces of open fields existed and can still be seen on the ground and in air photography but the farm economy included much livestock and many commons remained until the enclosures of the late eighteenth century. But the situation at any time cannot be related entirely, or perhaps even partly, to environmental considerations and division into areas can be misleading and dangerous. The reasons for changes in land use are still not fully known and an interacting mass of social, economic and political variables must be taken into account.

After the dissolution of the monasteries, landholdings further increased in size and country houses and parks were constructed by those who had the means to acquire land and property. The social, economic and, perhaps political division of classes was accentuated by these vents and also by the decline at that time of the woollen

cloth industry. Inflation and competition from home and abroad had reduced the prosperity and size of the textile centres. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, when this study ends, maps illustrate the large number of such country houses and parks on land previously monastic or waste in the south and west of the study area. A hypothesis is put forward that the threefold economic and social division of the area existed by that time and that this continued until well into the nineteenth century; perhaps, also, into the early twentieth century.

A survey of later developments in the area shows that further and important economic and social changes took place after the period covered in this study, from the late eighteenth century onwards. These changes may be rooted in the class structure which obtained by the beginning of the seventeenth century. The wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs settled in Somerset and in other parts of England by the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries developed an interest in improved technology and farming methods. Transport by land had been improved and speeded up and there was a renewed interest in land reclamation and drainage, and the profits to be made from investment in these developments. Marsh and moor were drained, enclosed and occupied by local landowners and farmers, and large new watercourses were constructed (for instance the King's Sedgemoor Drain constructed in 1797). In many lowland and coastal districts almost all common land was enclosed after 1770 and before the 1841 Tithe awards (J.Locke's map, 1770 and the 1841 Tithe Award maps, Somerset Record Office), and much common grazing had been lost.

The mid-eighteenth century saw the coming of canals and railways and a movement from the decaying inland villages to towns

such as Bridgwater, Highbridge and Taunton where employment was to be had. The old landowning pattern remained in the inland areas of the west and south. Places along the coast and near the railways became industrialised with railway workshops, engineering, and the manufacture of bricks and tiles. The ports, especially Bridgwater, flourished. Later in the century the new interest in seaside holidays increased the size of previously small fishing villages - Burnham on Sea and Minehead.

However, the nineteenth century industrial growth never matched that of northern England or South Wales. Bridgwater's population rose from 3600 in 1801 to 10960 in 1851 (Census returns, Somerset Record Office) but, later in the century, growth almost stopped. The agricultural depression caused unemployment, poverty and migration from the county to South Wales, the Midlands and overseas. Bridgwater and the north Somerset ports suffered loss of trade at the same time, partly as a result of the trade going to the new ports on Severnside and South Wales and also after the construction in 1886 of the Severn railway tunnel to Wales. In spite of the industrial northern fringe, the county, and a large part of the study area, was still dominated by the economic and social divisions - the large landowners in the west and south, the farming community, not now so prosperous, and the small industrial towns and ports. Social and political power, at least, was still in the hands of the wealthy and landowning classes.

During the last sixty years the patterns of settlement and industry have changed dramatically, giving rise to the interest in local conditions which prompted this study. After the 1914-18 war the increased size of ships resulted in the closure of most small ports. The railway works and the brick and tile factories closed

during the 1950s and 1960s because of centralisation and competition. Economic difficulties and in some cases first world war casualties caused the break up of many of the large estates. These were divided and sold to farmers and to house builders and speculators. Modern farms, now prosperous (at least until the present problems with overproduction and the milk quota), increased in size and productivity.

Just before, during and shortly after the 1939-45 war, new industries came to the area: plastics, chemicals, light engineering and woodworking. A large increase in population followed; the 1981 census counted 27825 persons in Bridgwater and 36200 in Taunton, the county town and administrative centre. Now, particularly on the coast and in the villages, the population increase is being accentuated by an influx of retired persons from other parts of England. The population of Burnham on Sea has risen by 27 per cent during the last ten years. Villages have been enlarged to contain commuters and pensioners rather than farm or local workers; agriculture now uses machines rather than men. A fairly high unemployment rate causes young persons to move away. The proportion of inhabitants of Somerset descent to newcomers diminishes steadily.

CHAPTER II

THE SITUATION AT THE TIME OF THE DOMESDAY SURVEY

The major source of data for the review in this chapter is the Domesday Survey itself, compiled in 1086, twenty years after the Norman Conquest. This sets the scene for the eleventh century, covering England with the exception of some northern counties.

William I ordered this survey to evaluate land and property and to establish the actual holders, at a time when Norman lords had taken over almost all the major landholdings, under the king. Therefore, settlement patterns and economic conditions at that time were still largely those of the pre-conquest society. The mass of information gathered by the Domesday surveyors was rearranged, abridged and copied into one volume at Winchester. In 1783 the text was printed by Abraham Farley, and, in 1861/3, facsimiles were prepared by the Ordnance Survey. Farley's text, with some errors noted, was used in the most recent translation of the Domesday for Somerset (Morris, 1980, Intro). For the southwestern counties, including Somerset, however, some extra information, details of some persons and livestock for instance, is obtainable from another set of returns. This is the Liber Exoniensis the manuscript of which is held at Exeter Cathedral Library.

These two versions of the Domesday survey have formed the subject of many studies dealing with England as a whole and Somerset in particular. Most analyses of the data reveal defects and omissions and difficulties in interpretation. In part these problems may be due to its original function as a survey carried out for economic and political purposes. The surveyors were employed to find out the names of the main landholders, manors and settlements. The use of land for arable purposes, meadow, livestock and woodland, and a valuation of

land and property, was required as a basis for the assessment of tax, and cash values were the matter of major importance. The number and status of persons occupying land, or working on it, was of interest, whilst persons not employed or landless were ignored. Changes in the holders of property and in valuations between 1066 and 1086 were, also, recorded. In Somerset, large tracts of royal forest, moorland and marsh were largely ignored, presumably because the land was Crown property or was thought to be of little economic value (Morgan, 1938, 143).

Discrepancies also arose through errors and omissions in transcription. Interpretation has been further hampered by ignorance of the exact contemporary meaning of some of the specific terms used (Morgan, 1979, 23); and measurements of land and distances were sometimes ambiguous. For instance, forests were described in leagues (Finn & Wheatley, 1967, 187). The use and meaning of the term 'hide' has been the subject of much discussion; some researchers now consider that a hide varied in area in different regions in England because of local physical conditions, and that attempts made to standardise it at one hundred and twenty acres had been unsuccessful. It is now suggested that the hide could be used in several ways: as a unit of land measurement, as a measure of monetary value or production, or as a unit of liability for tax. In west Somerset, in particular, the actual size of the hide appears to vary and many small settlements are rated in 'virgates' and 'furlongs' (Bates, 1899, 104, Round, 1906, 380 & 383-434, Morris, 1980, 294).

Further problems arise when the data are studied. In Somerset, the numbers of plough teams held by lord and villagers sometimes exceed and sometimes fall short of the total numbers entered for the manor and the suggestion has been made that the surveyor entered an

estimated, or assumed, total (Morris, 1980, 294). Again, Domesday does not always distinguish between the lands, workers or beasts owned by the manor and those controlled by tenants.

Domesday settlements

The correct identification and location of Domesday place names has often proved difficult. Inadequate understanding of the language used in 1086 and lack of local knowledge has led to errors. The same name in Domesday can now be spelled in many different ways: for instance 'cruche' can be 'crook' or 'cricket'. Places now prefixed 'East' or 'West' are not differentiated; some named holdings such as composite manors covered more than one settlement and the totals shown probably include unnamed small farms and hamlets over a wide area. Many settlements not yet identified in Domesday are now known, through the evidence of a family document or a monastic charter, or from Norman or pre-conquest architecture in a church, to have existed in the eleventh century (Darby, 1967, 355). Fieldwork may indicate the location of a hamlet possibly abandoned or moved to a new site before the implementation of the Domesday survey. Some clarification of the extent and boundaries of church and monastic estates can be obtained from Saxon charters of grants and endowments to the religious institutions. These charters survive, amongst other places, in records held at Trinity College Cambridge, in Wells Cathedral Library and in the Somerset Record Office. Many of them have been transcribed, studied and published (Grundy, 1927 & 1934, Finberg, 1964). Unfortunately, although some few charter documents are original, many are, in fact, later copies and considerable caution is needed in their use: medieval copying has produced errors and mistakes. Also, the study of maps and documents without adequate field work can be unsatisfactory. A more recent study of the linguistic derivation of place names now raises questions about the identification of some

sites and boundaries in the work of Grundy and Finberg (Gelling, 1978B, 209-16).

At one time the evidence of place names was thought to indicate that many settlements were of post-conquest date (Maitland, 1911, 84). In recent years, however, this has been disputed. Research into language and orthography has shown that, apart from the addition of a Norman lord's name to an existing village, there are actually few instances of Norman French village names (Gelling, 1978A, 236). Some authorities now consider that with the exception of later holdings on reclaimed and assarted land, the main pattern of village settlement had been laid down by 1066 (Titow, 1969, 35, Dodgshon 1978, 81). But other scholars feel that examination of the Domesday entries shows that changes were taking place at about that time; scattered individual settlements in large pre-conquest estates were developing into nuclear structures. Landholding lords were taking control (Sawyer, 1979, 8). It is suggested that some of these multiple estates had been held by the Crown in Saxon times, with tenants and bondsmen, and that the estates survived as large scattered holdings recorded in Domesday (Jones, 1978, 75-6). Some large fragmented estates in the fertile valleys of central Somerset are apparent at 1086. Some of these were held by the king and some by influential Norman lords (Hobhouse, 1889, x & 22-23).

Local historians and historical geographers writing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have quoted transcripts of Domesday to support their identification of landholding, landholders and settlements (Collinson, 1791, Phelps, 1836). These writers, however, arranged Domesday place names by Hundreds and by the parishes of later centuries. Further, the organisation of Hundreds at 1086 differed from the medieval pattern and neither version of Domesday provides adequate information on this problem (Morris, 1980,

Appendix I 370-80). Importantly, the attitudes of their time gave these writers a primary concern with estates and landholders in 1086 and with the growth of estates in succeeding centuries. In the late nineteenth century other writers examined the data, checked some of the assumptions made about the identity of Domesday place names and used the Exeter Domesday tax return in an effort to reconstruct the Domesday Hundreds (Eyton, 1880, I & II). The Victoria County History of Somerset I (Page, 1906) contains the translated text of both the Exchequer and Exeter versions and an introduction to Domesday with explanations (Bates, 1906, 434-525, Round, 1906, 583-433). In this publication the writers cast doubt on some of the earlier site identifications. Scholars in the present century have questioned the conclusions of the contributors to the Victoria County History and have amended their interpretations. Examination of some forty place names in Somerset led to revised identifications and to some new locations within the study area - for instance, Andersey and Aller (Morland, 1954/5, 38-48 & 1963/4, 94-98). These revisions have been included in the Domesday Gazetteer and are listed in the most recent translation of the Somerset Domesday (Darby & Versey, 1975, Morris, 1980, 347-68). It can now be accepted that the majority of the six hundred and fifty places named in Somerset have been identified and that a distribution map gives a fair picture of the situation. However, in Somerset as in the rest of England, the pattern shown cannot yet be regarded as fully complete or entirely accurate.

Distribution of population and settlement in the late eleventh century

The total population of England at 1086 can be estimated only roughly. Estimates vary from one to two million total population in England, ignoring those northern counties which were laid waste by the Conqueror and not surveyed. Multiples of 3.5 to 5.0 have been used

with the Domesday figures (Russell, 1948, 38, 52, Postan, 1966, 562, Derby & Finn, 1967, 336). By this means it was hoped to include families, persons in holy orders, and others who are not mentioned in the survey because, if landless or not employed, they had no economic significance in the eyes of the recorders.

The south and east of England appear to have been the most prosperous and well populated. Somerset, as a county, ranked about seventh from the top in terms of the estimated population (Dodgshon, 1978, 83). A recent estimate suggests an unfree or 'bound' Somerset population of 12856 with 619 burgesses (Dunning, 1978, 10).

Domesday data have been analysed to produce estimated distributions of population and settlement for the various regions of England, including Somerset (Finn & Wheatley, 1967, 146-65). The recorded numbers of persons were averaged per square mile over geographical regions, arbitrarily based on a collection of parishes, (Finn & Wheatley, 1967, Fig. 39). This method however, is open to criticism because the chosen areas were large, extending in some instances over sixty or eighty square miles and appear to have been based on the layout of the physical geography. They also cut across different types of landholding and they ignore local economic, political or historic factors. Averages can be lowered by the existence of sparsely populated royal forests as in the Mendip Hills, in the lower Parrett valley at North Petherton and at Neroche south of Taunton. Areas of moor and marsh can have a similar effect. Also, a similar density could result from one large settlement in a deserted countryside or from a large number of small sites.

A clearer picture of the situation may be seen in an illustration of the distribution of settlements within the study area. Figure 2 uses as a basis the 1967 analysis of settlements by Finn & Wheatley (1967, 146, Fig. 36). Symbols on Figure 2 indicate sites where

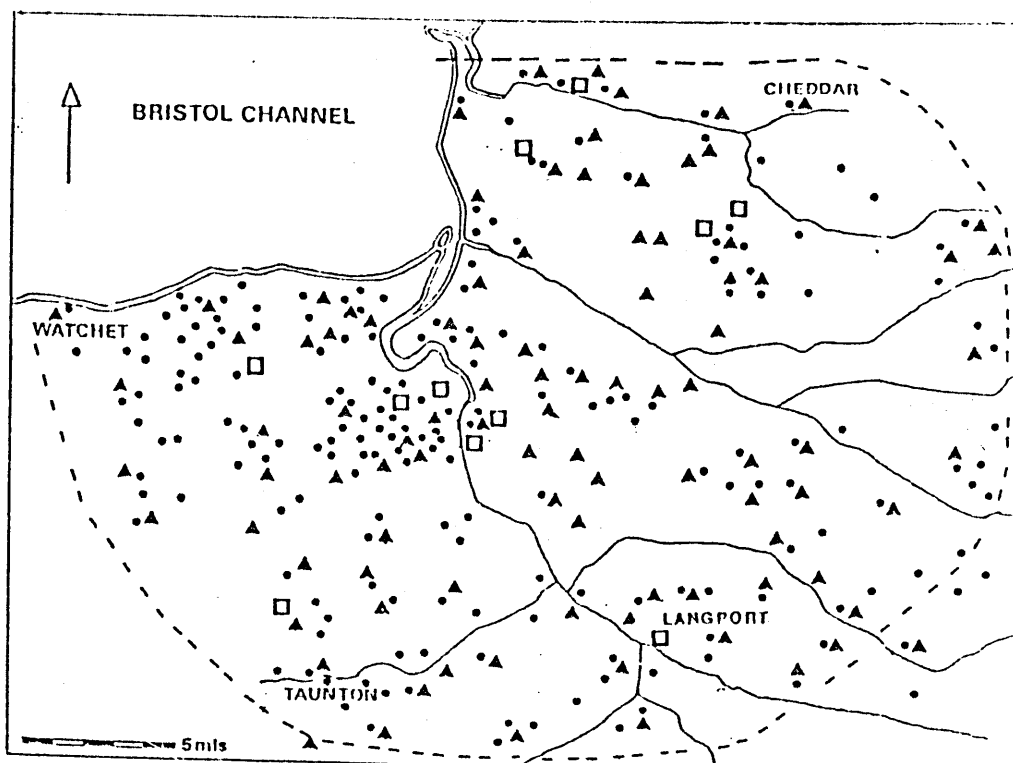


Fig. 2. Domesday settlements and fourteenth century 'vills'

- Domesday sites identified in 1967
(Finn & Wheatley, 146, Fig. 36)
- Later amendments (Morris, 1980, 347-68)
- ▲ 'Vills' in 1315 (Dickinson, 1889, 53-78)

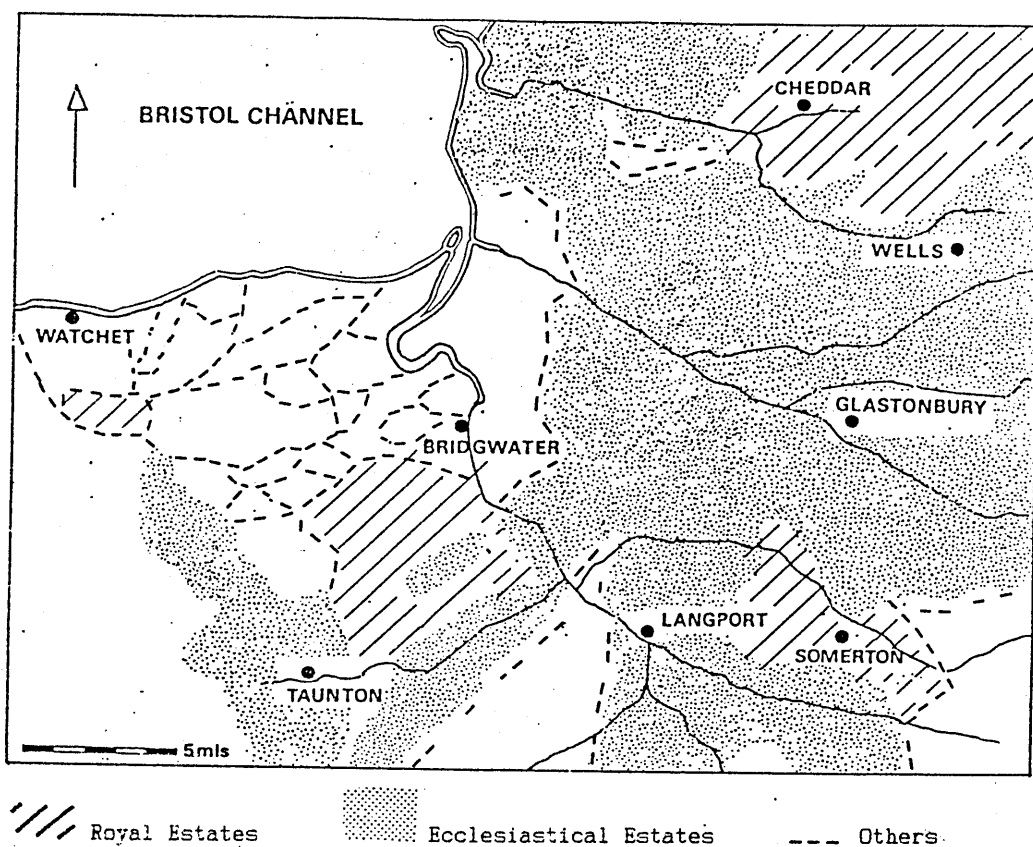


Fig. 3. Major Estate holders at Domesday
(Hobhouse, 1889, x & 22-23)

identification has since been questioned or amended (Morris, 1980, 347-68). For later comparison, the sites of fourteenth century 'vills' are also shown. The patterns illustrated in Figure 2 have been used to suggest a paucity of settlement on the high ground of west Somerset and in the marshy lowlands of the central valleys where, in fact, the population density is low (Williams, 1970, 22, Fig. 5). Whilst settlements might avoid land unsuitable for agriculture, observed variations in settlement patterns and population are not now attributed entirely to geographical and morphological factors as they were some fifty years ago (Morgan, 1938, 139-44). Modern students acknowledge the importance of the environment, but feel that its effects are tempered by an interacting mass of social, economic and political variables. A more accurate account and explanation of the conditions prevailing may be found in an examination of the local space economy, the social conditions and the estate structures and conditions of landholding and also the dominant ideologies (Newson, 1976, 239-55). In recent years it has been pointed out that western Somerset, with many Domesday place names close together, contained a large number of small sized holdings, isolated farms and scattered habitats; and that the more widely dispersed sites in the south and east might represent a pattern of incipient nucleated settlements (Dunning, 1978, 10).

The landholders and political factors after the conquest

Figure 3 gives an outline of the extent and distribution of lands held in central Somerset by the major landholders at 1086, and some arguments can be put forward which may provide explanations for the situation. In 1889, an interest in the location of land held by the various classes of landholder led to the production of a map of Somerset which illustrated the estates in 1086 (Hobhouse, 1889, x & 22-23). Amendments to this map, with particular reference to the

central lowlands and based on research into Glastonbury Abbey records, were made by Williams (1970, 20, Fig. 4). Here, a simplified sketch is drawn from these sources (Figure 3) to indicate a general pattern in the study area. Four main observations can be made from this map:

- (1) the religious establishments held wide expanses of land in the south and east of the area,
- (2) the Crown directly held some old-established royal manors and forests,
- (3) the Conqueror's supporters, in particular Walter de Douai, William de Falaise and Roger de Courcelles held large estates near the mouth of the River Parrett; and
- (4) numerous small landholdings are seen in the western region.

An explanation of the ecclesiastical possessions in the lowlands states that these developed from pre-Saxon monastic settlements on the isolated "islands" in the marshes and from numerous grants of land to these institutions by Saxon kings and nobles (Williams, 1970, 19). In the estates of the Norman lords we may see evidence of a political decision to give land in strategic locations to men who had supported the Conqueror, and so to reduce the danger of revolt (Finn, 1963, 23-24). In the study area post-conquest castles of the "motte and bailey" type existed at Dunball on the Parrett estuary (Chater & Major, 1909, 162), at Castle Neroche on the hills south of Taunton (Davison, 1972, 16-56), at Fenny Castle in the Axe valley and, possibly, at Stogursey in the Quantock foothills west of Bridgwater (information from Mr R. McDonnell, Western Archaeological Trust excavations 1983).

One nineteenth century writer has, also, suggested that an economic effect of political events could perhaps be found in a few manors which showed a decrease in value between 1066 and 1086 (Bennett, 1880, 24-28). These manors have been checked in the most

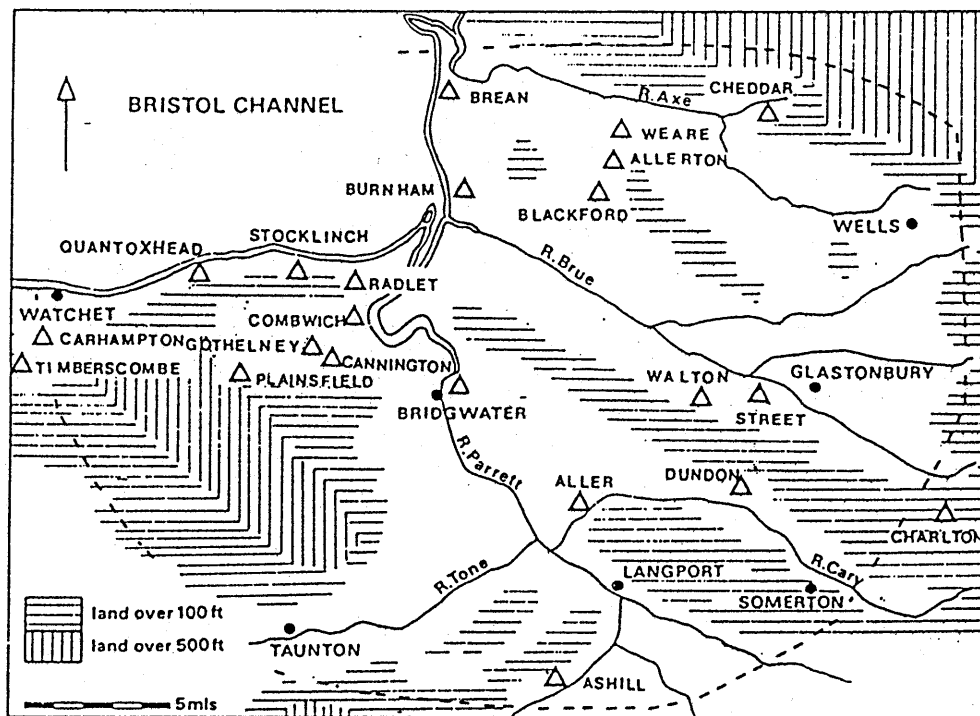


Fig. 4. Manors with values reduced at Domesday = Δ

recent translation of the Domesday records (Morris, 1980) and are shown on Figure 4. Over the whole county, manors showing a reduced value number only 134 out of a total of 922 but they do appear to form groups in two areas, the first in north Somerset outside the scope of the present study and the second in central Somerset along the Bristol Channel and eastward towards the Fosse Way and Ham Hill. Bennett notes insurrections south of Bath and near Ham Hill shortly after the conquest (quoted from Freeman, Norman Conquest, Vol. II). He also quotes a comment in the Exeter Domesday that, on the north Somerset coast "Hae predictae mansiones sunt vastates per Irlandes Homines" (these manors noted were laid waste by men from Ireland). Bennett's research gives rise to speculation about disorder following the Conquest, and reduced values may have resulted from raids on the coast by supporters of Harold and others, or may have been caused by devastation after revolt. The sites shown, however, do not form a majority of manors in their immediate area, and surrounding places show values unaltered or increased. They are not related to any particular type of landholder or holding except that, apart from Ilminster, all were small manors with values of £5 or less and with a comparatively small number of inhabitants. On present evidence, therefore, the suggestion of a political cause is not proved; other local factors, at present unknown, may be responsible.

The social organisation

Many landholdings were described as 'manors'. Under the feudal system the King stood at the head of a pyramid of landholders, with all land originally vested in him. Allegiance and some kind of service was an essential part of the system. The Norman king drew much of his political and economic power from this organisation and large estates had been granted to trusted followers. At the local

level the manor has been described as "the lowest unit of landed property held by a lord, or person above the common agricultural worker". Some have seen it as "a unit of lordship whose meaning centred on the co-existence of a demesne worked by customary tenants" (Morgan, 1979, 129, Hilton, 1976, 122). Throughout the Middle Ages the definition of a manor did not necessarily coincide with that of a village. A village could be one unit in a very large manor, or it could be divided between several manors (Page, 1911, 270).

Peasants were listed in various classes - villeins, freemen, cottars, bordars, coliberti, serfs and others, and different proportions of the classes are apparent in the various counties of England and even in the small area under study. The peasant classes varied in status and economic conditions. The villeins enumerated in Domesday are considered to have been of free condition under the law but, if living on the estate of a lord, they were subject to the customary feudal laws and duties. These included service on the demesne particularly at sowing and harvest, restrictions on movement away from the manor and the payment of dues on produce, use of the mill, marriage and death (Hilton, 1973, 86, Bennett, 1969, 99). Amongst the villeins some were more prosperous with one or two ploughs and larger holdings. They could market their produce and employ their neighbours who had little or no land. Villeins paying rent, described as censarii were found in north and northwest England, but not in the south. The proportion of freemen was highest in East Anglia and Lincolnshire, and very few are found in Somerset. Cottars and bordars, who held only small plots of land, were considerably more numerous, relatively, in the western counties than in the Midlands and in the east. Craftsmen who also tilled small plots of land, swineherds and millers appear everywhere in small numbers (Finn & Wheatley, 1967, 166, Hilton, 1973, 36).

For Somerset as a whole one estimate gives 41 per cent villeins, 37 per cent bordars and cottars, 16 per cent serfs and 6 per cent others, including priests, fishermen, swineherds, ploughmen, coliberti, socmen and millers (Darby, 1967, 368-72). Socmen, of whom few are recorded, were tenants on royal or church lands, nominally free men who paid homage for their lands which could be divided on death, though they also paid the usual manorial fees and dues (Page, 1911, 273, Sawyer, 1979, 8). Some of these may have been reduced in status to villeins on a manor, but thirteenth century manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells refer to tenants in socage who paid rents and, possibly, ranked between freeholders and villeins. Also on the ecclesiastical and royal manors coliberti, or freedmen, and slaves were more numerous than elsewhere (Finn, 1963, 117, Morris, 1980, 294, Page, 1906, 272-73). A survival of pre-conquest social conditions may be indicated by the considerable number of slaves and freedmen and the existence of socmen on royal and ecclesiastical estates in Somerset and Wiltshire (Morris, 1980, 294). It is now thought that a feudal social hierarchy, and also the manorial social and economic system, existed before the Norman conquest; also that these conditions might, like some estates, have derived from late Celtic and post Roman customs. But a tightening of control and some centralisation of estates by the ruling classes may be seen in the changed conditions and status of some peasants who became estate tenants under Norman law (Dodgshon, 1978, 81, Hilton, 1973, 42 & 44).

For a closer study of the rural class pattern in the study area twenty five Domesday manors have been chosen from each of three parts of central Somerset where different landholding systems apparently existed. Land west of the river Parrett (No. 1 in the Table) contained a large number of separate manors and small holdings; the coastal plain north of Bridgwater (No. 2) was under the control of a Norman

lord with much land let to sub-tenants; the Polden Hills (No. 3) comprised manors of Glastonbury Abbey. Very large manors which contained many villages and farms were excluded from this exercise because it was felt they would form a separate study. Numbers of workers only are taken from the latest Domesday transcription (Morris, 1980) and the results of the enquiry are expressed in totals and percentages for each of three groups of twenty five manors. This gives a mean and no attempt has been made to evaluate other local conditions and deviations. Since this study is interested only in the proportions of the peasant classes, no attempt has been made to compare the actual areas of land attached to the settlements.

TABLE I

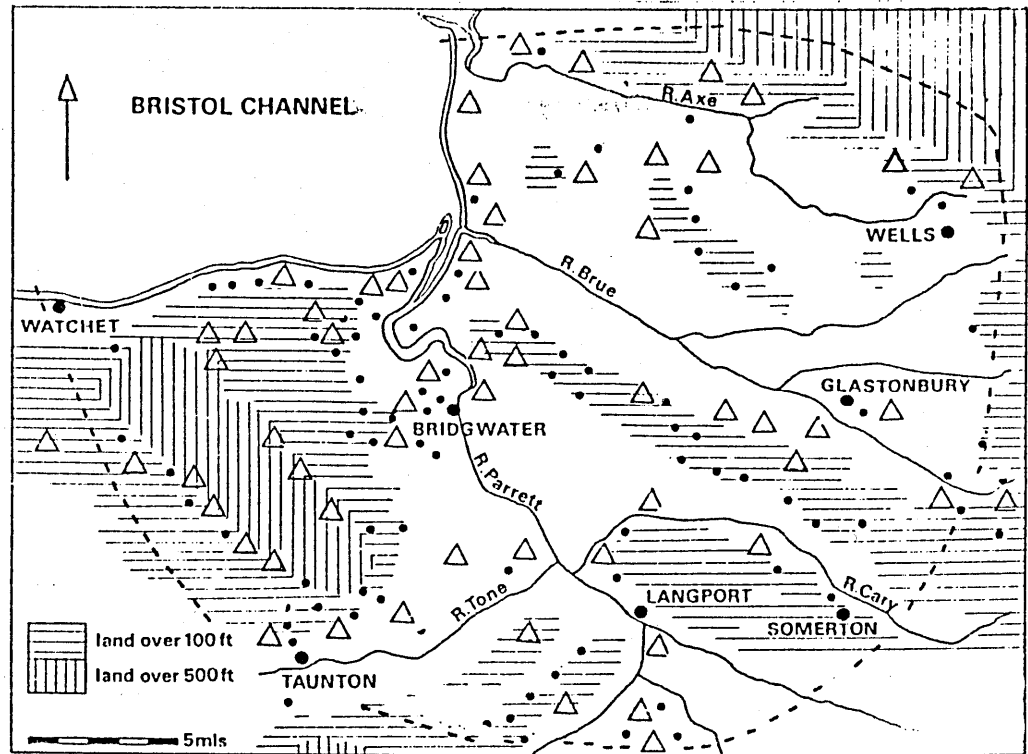
REGION	CATEGORIES AND NUMBERS OF WORKERS					total
	<u>villeins</u>	<u>bordars</u>	<u>cottars</u>	<u>freedmen</u>	<u>serfs</u>	
1. west of Parrett	256	116	15	-	65	452
% of total	56.6	25.7	3.3	-	14.4	100
2. coastal plain	320	146	66	-	90	622
% of total	51.4	23.5	10.6	-	14.5	100
3. Polden Hills	229	153	21	20	81	504
% of total	45.5	30.4	4.1	4.0	16.0	100

The settlements in region No. 2 in the lowlands appear to be generally larger as has already been suggested by Dr Dunning (1978, 10). A greater proportion of cottagers, if this is proved to be the general case, may indicate some particular social or administrative arrangements. The higher proportion of freedmen and slaves on the

monastic manors supports, in this exercise at least, the statement that this is a general rule in the south west (Finn, 1963, 117).

The Domesday Economy

The examination of Domesday entries reveals a primarily rural economy in Somerset, with a few small market towns and only local industries connected with the everyday requirements of the inhabitants. Moreover, the entries show that mixed farming and the keeping of livestock was of considerable importance even at that early date. The Domesday figures, even if not yet fully understood, indicate differing uses of land and resources and it is not easy to obtain comparisons of comparative prosperity in different areas. In 1967 Finn & Wheatley, (158-80, Figs 37-42) calculated the prosperity of different parts of the county through Domesday statistics of plough teams. Numbers of teams were averaged, in the same manner as population numbers, per square mile over regions based on a number of parishes in chosen geographical areas. Not surprisingly, higher averages were concentrated in the areas of densest settlement and population. But a large population dependent on arable farming alone might not have been prosperous, particularly in conditions of increased population and land shortage. Also in the coastal region north of the Parrett, where there was a considerable population and settlements of a fair size, there was a comparatively small number of plough teams. These coastal plains, the valleys south of Langport and the Glastonbury manors on the Polden Hills contained the largest number of cattle (Morris, 1980). Sheep, by far the most numerous animal in the survey, totalled 13000 over the central Somerset area with flocks of 200 to 300 on the slopes of the Mendip Hills, on the Quantock Hills and on the manors of Glastonbury Abbey and the Bishop of Winchester. The size of these flocks reflects the monetary value



• Meadow

△ Pasture

Fig. 5. Distribution of meadow and pasture in 1086

of wool. The pig, kept by cottagers or grazed in manorial woodland, appears almost everywhere. Livestock required meadow and pasture, and meadow is recorded in Domesday as an item of value and continued to be so regarded throughout the Middle Ages. The common pastures were also very important to stock owners and villagers. Figure 5, showing the distribution of meadow land and pasture recorded in Domesday, has been compiled from a calculation by Finn & Wheatley (1967, 180, Fig. 42) and from information in more recent works (Williams, 1970, 38, Dunning, 1978, 10 and Morris, 1980). In this figure distribution and not areal measurements are shown because of the difficulty of interpretation of the Domesday entries where meadow is recorded in acres and pasture in acres, leagues or furlongs.

Domesday gives little information about towns in central Somerset. In the study area six boroughs are recorded, Taunton, Watchet, Milverton, Langport, Lyng and Axbridge. Markets, the number of burgesses and some borough rights such as customary dues are noted briefly. Overall a rural landscape is seen with a variety of landholders and with very little apparent economic or political cohesion. It has been pointed out that the land taken over at the Norman conquest was well cultivated and wealthy with a network of towns and markets (Titow, 1969, 35, Finberg, 1972, 525). Some feel that too much credit has been given to the Normans for instigating a vigorous economy (Finn & Wheatley, 1967, 162, Dodgshon, 1978, 81). It may be that any apparent lack of integration at 1086 was based on sound political reasoning to prevent too much collusion and contact between vassals. A lack of power by central government is not borne out by the speed of execution and thoroughness of the Domesday returns, which indicated the strength of William's authority.

In spite of omissions and inadequacies, the Domesday survey provides an impressive summary of the political and economic

situation in England in general and in the small study area in particular as it was in 1086. It is perhaps a static cross section, but the country had reached a watershed in its developmental history. The Norman king and his supporters had taken power and displaced the Saxon landholders and a new political system, and probably a new system of organisation of estates, was being enforced. Nevertheless, the main settlement pattern and the activities of the mass of the population still reflected Saxon rural society. However, in central Somerset, some basic economic factors, which were to become more important in medieval times, were already apparent: the availability of land for improvement, the existence of transport routes and some markets, and the importance of livestock, in particular the sheep which produced the wool.

CHAPTER III

THE ELEVENTH TO THE EARLY FOURTEENTH CENTURIES

After the Domesday Survey there exists no complete extant set of data that are in any way comparable to the 1086 survey, until the tax returns of the sixteenth century. Developments have to be estimated as far as possible and inferred from incomplete information. Nevertheless, during the late nineteenth and the present century, documentary evidence has been interpreted as showing a general increase in population, settlement and prosperity during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in many parts of England as well as on the continent of Europe (Bennett, 1969, 46-47, Postan, 1973, 11). In studies dealing with English rural areas, increases in population and settlement have been observed from examinations of the Hundred Rolls of 1277-79 (Harley, 1958, 8-18). Unfortunately these 1277 Rolls do not survive for Somerset, but population increases have been inferred from the tax returns of 1303 and the 1327 Lay Subsidy Rolls (which contain the names of 10480 persons paying tax on goods worth more than ten shillings (Dickinson, 1889, 281-374, Dunning, 1978, 13-14)). These lists of tax payers excluded clergy, monks, wives, children and poor people and, even with a multiple of only 3.5 (Darby, 1967, 336), these sources suggest an overall increase of some 23000 on the estimated Domesday population of Somerset of about 13400 persons.

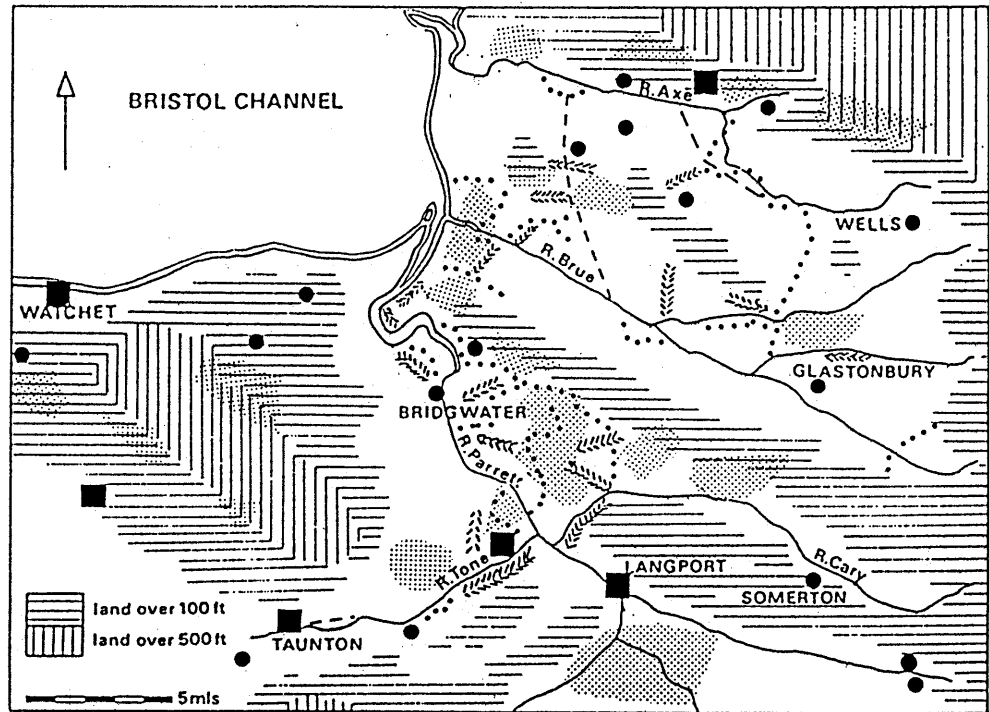
Population and settlement patterns

Changes in the distribution and number of settlements have been studied through an examination of a list of Somerset 'vills' or lordships, each expected to produce a soldier, which was prepared in 1315. A transcript of this list has been made from the Harleian manuscripts (Dickinson, 1889, 53-78) and the sites listed are marked on Figure 2 for comparison with the Domesday settlements (the

triangle symbol)). Some difficulties arise in the use of this information because the 'vill', according to Dickinson, was "something like a large parish with small hamlets attached", and the incorporation of small hamlets into one place name could be one of the causes of an apparent reduction in the number of sites west of the river Parrett. On the other hand, 'vills' shown where no Domesday place names are recorded may be completely new settlements in reclaimed areas; or they may simply have represented places existing, but not named or yet identified, in the Domesday survey itself.

Some have seen the expanding pattern of settlement as a consequence of a population explosion which put pressure on agricultural land (Dodgshon, 1987, 94-95). Court Rolls provide evidence for the splitting of strips in open fields and of an increase in joint ownership, and larger fines are seen as an indication of land shortage (Bennett, 1969, 46-47, Postan, 1973, 11). But in recent decades much discussion has focussed on the underlying causes of the changes and about the inter-related effects of a number of factors: population numbers, the availability of land for development and improvement, economic and political problems; industrial growth and changes in, and disputes over, the management of land and resources.

During the two centuries following the Domesday Surveys, the study area and, in particular, the river valleys of the Axe, Brue, Parrett and Tone witnessed a considerable amount of land reclamation, the construction of new watercourses, and the founding of new towns and trading settlements at the instigation of the major ecclesiastical and aristocratic landowners. Valuable transport routes were developed and landowners exacted dues for access to these. The work was facilitated by technological improvements, including the development of weirs, embankments and windmills - the latter coming into use in









-  Areas of land reclamation
-  New waterways in the fourteenth century
-  Embankments and causeways
-  Old watercourses seen in air photographs
-  Domesday boroughs
-  Towns existing by the fourteenth century

Fig. 6. Land reclamation, waterways and towns in the
fourteenth century

England in the late twelfth century (Bennett, 1969, 129, Coulthard & Watts, 1978, 17).

Bridgwater, previously a small village, received a Royal Charter in 1200 enabling the town authorities to hold markets and fairs and to levy tolls on river and port traffic. Moreover, the Abbots and landholding lords founded riverside settlements to promote trade and thereby to improve their finances - for instance, Weare and Rackley on the Axe, Newport on the Tone and Downend on the Parrett, and also small market towns such as Montacute to the south east. Figure 6 shows an increase in central Somerset from the six Domesday boroughs to a total of twenty three towns or settlements by the early 1300s. The new financial advantages and growing status of the controlling authorities is recorded in the published abbey and borough archives (Williams, 1970, 65, Elton, 1891, 196, Dilks, 1933 & 1938, xix-xx).

Since very few manorial court records survive from this date information about the estates and the activities of laymen in the rural manors is more difficult to obtain. Fortunately the names of landholders figure in ecclesiastical and local justice records, in pleas and Feet of Fines (Green, 1892, xxiv & 324-404, Landon, 1921 & 1929). Some light is thrown on the lords and their peasants by an inquest relating to manors and owners dated circa 1286. These records were re-written in the sixteenth century and are incomplete, but they have been transcribed and published (Dickinson, 1889, 1-52). Dickinson noted that, in legal terms, manors could be sub-divided until 1289 (18th Edw.I, 1289) and detailed examination of the records reveals that most of the larger holdings of the Norman lords in 1086 had been broken up by the early 1300s when new landholding families began to emerge. The Mohuns and the Luttrells held many manors in west Somerset and the Cogans are recorded as the largest landholders

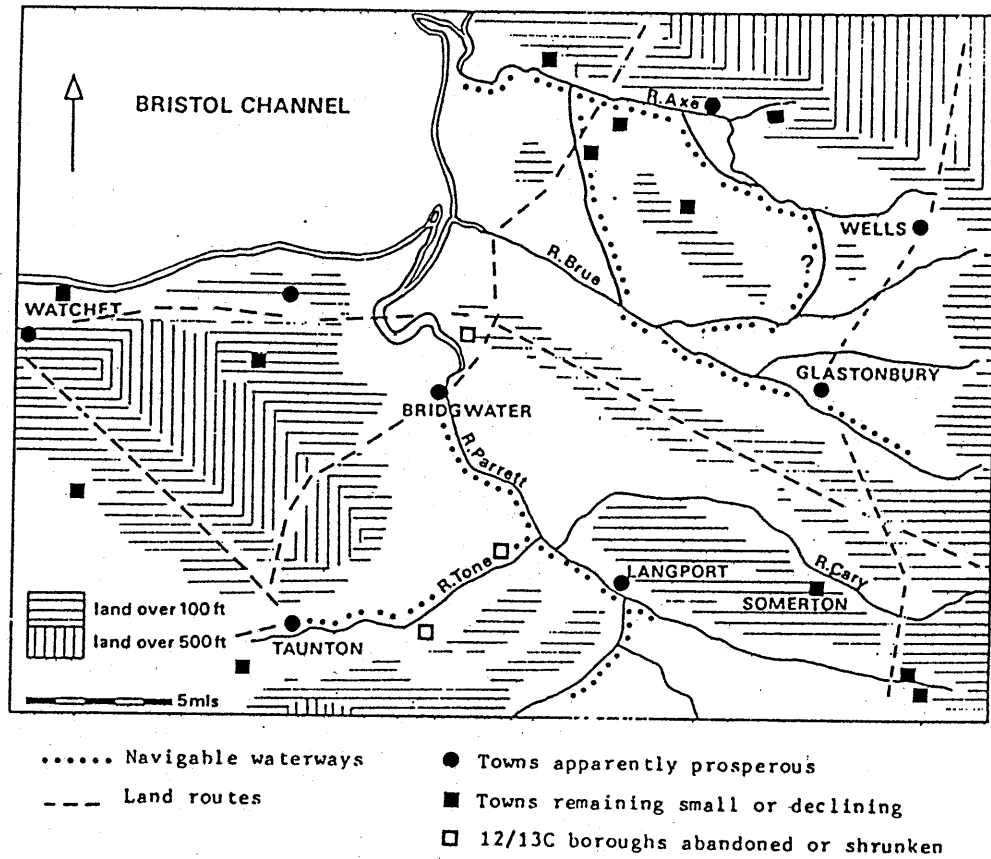


Fig. 7. Fourteenth century trade routes,
waterways and towns

on the coastal plains. Also, these same families held other manors and lands as tenants of the abbeys. Numerous references to tenants and duties on reclaimed land suggest drainage, land improvement and in all likelihood the existence of a considerable number of tenant peasantry, at least in the coastal plains north of the Parrett (Chadwyck-Healey, 1897, 84, 126, 151, 160, 161, 166, Green, 1892, 324).

Postan (1966, 552) has commented on the growing opportunities for trade and marketing of produce provided by these new boroughs and settlements, and on the noticeable increase in prosperity and monetary wealth through trading. Regional and overseas trade in wool, woollen cloth, wine and other goods was increasing in the larger towns and ports (Dilks, 1933, Dunning, 1978, 20). From the late twelfth century onwards, a network of village markets and fairs began to serve as collection and distribution points for the towns (Britnell, 1981, 209). In Somerset, although the conditions were very poor, an embryonic road system for carts and pack horses existed by the fourteenth century and these roads connected with the navigable rivers (Figure 7). The main routes ran south from Wells through Somerton into Devon and to the south coast. Another line developed along the north Somerset coast through Bridgwater to north Devon and southwards eventually reaching Exeter through Taunton. The routes of Roman roads were also used, particularly along the Polden Hills from the Bristol Channel to Ilchester and along the Fosse Way to Bath (Cantor, 1982, 23, Dunning, 1978, 21).

It is clear that a rising rate of money fines for new leases of land was due, not to population pressure but to the availability of ready cash from marketing. In addition, illegal assarting on waste and royal forests may have reflected a financial incentive rather than a desperate need for more agricultural land (Titow, 1969, 75). As

many writers have accepted there occurred, in fact, a rise in the general level of prosperity in Somerset from the eleventh to the early fourteenth centuries but, as we have noted earlier, in reality there existed clear differences from place to place in the distribution of wealth.

The 1327 Lay Subsidy Rolls, transcribed by Dickinson, (1889, 79-337) gives details of places, persons and individual amounts of tax on possessions. No attempt has ever been made to compare these Lay Subsidy figures of population or wealth with the Domesday figures, settlement by settlement. Indeed, in all likelihood such comparisons pose many difficulties, not only because of subsequent changes that occurred in land holdings and the size and location of settlements over the intervening centuries, but also because of the possibilities of error, mis-statement, exemptions and evasions in both sets of documentary records (Williams, 1970, 77). Nevertheless, for the lowlands of the Brue and Parrett valleys in central Somerset a study has been made of these data in order to calculate the distribution of relative wealth over selected areas and to compare this with estimates of Domesday wealth using numbers of plough teams as surrogate measures (Finn & Wheatley, 1967, Fig. 37., Williams, 1970, 76, Figs. 9 & 10). Williams' calculations and figures certainly indicate a rise in the apparent settlement density and prosperity of the lowland plains of central Somerset. This increased prosperity and also the changing settlement pattern was attributed by Williams as well as by the authors of the Victoria County History of Somerset, as having been due to this period of land reclamation and the consequent renting of reclaimed land, particularly by the ecclesiastical landholders (Page, 1911, 281-82, Williams, 1970, 75-79). These developments, therefore,

are of major significance in understanding the historical geography of central Somerset at this time.

Land reclamation

The hypothesis has been put forward that, instead of an increasing population resulting in land reclamation, the reverse situation might apply: i.e. the availability of marginal land for improvement and colonisation provided the impetus and opportunity for observed increases in population and settlement. Reclamation of waste and drainage is now seen as part of a general trend that was taking place in many European countries at the time (Postan, 1966, 552, Williams, 1970, 3). In central Somerset the wide-spread estates of the ecclesiastical institutions indicated on Figure 3 existed until the sixteenth century, and these estates contained much moorland and marsh that, in itself, had been considered of little value in Domesday times. The estate records and registers of these landholders, in particular the records of Abbots of Glastonbury, Athelney and Muchelney and the Bishops of Wells, provide invaluable documentary evidence as to the extent and nature of land reclamation and drainage activities (Watkin, 1944, 1948 & 1949, Hobhouse, 1887, Elton, 1891, Scott-Holmes, 1896, Bird, 1907, 188-9 & 210, Williams, 1970, 27, 29, 31 & 40-74). It is clear that such land improvements were being undertaken during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but without any overall plan, even on the large estates. These activities appear to have been conducted piecemeal and carried on throughout the whole period, at least on the ecclesiastical estates (Williams, 1970, 45, 47-49, Page, 1911, 272-73, Dunning, 1978, 13, Elton, 1891, 48-50).

Some scholars have concluded that the coastal clay lands, being slightly raised above flood level, were already well settled and did not require much reclamation (Cantor, 1982, 103, Williams, 1970, 43).

But an examination of the surviving records in Justices' Rolls, Feet of Fines, bishops' records and Inquisitiones Post Mortem, together with visual evidence derived from air photography and field work, now reveals that considerable drainage and improvement work was, in fact, carried out on the larger estates along the coast at Stretcholt, Bawdrip and Highbridge (Chadwyck-Healey, 1897, 84, 126, 151, 166, Green 1892, 324; unpublished fieldwork carried out by the author). Moreover, field observations have revealed the existence of raised earth platforms on the low lying moors to the north of the Polden Hills and these platforms contain fragments of pottery dating from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries (Ellis, 1985, 97).

Not all reclamation in central Somerset was on the lowlands. On the higher ground of the Mendip slopes near Cheddar, for instance, land was disafforested by the Bishop of Wells and leased as assarts in the early fourteenth century (Scott-Holmes, 1896, iii-iv). A recent investigation, involving evidence obtained by excavation, measurements and knowledge of ploughing techniques, indicates a medieval date for the abandoned field system on the Mendip slopes near Wells (Whittington, 1976, 39-44). To the west, farms were established on the Brendon Hills during the thirteenth century (Williams, 1978 28). Lynchets and abandoned field systems are widespread throughout the study area, especially on the Quantock and Polden Hills and in the Parrett valley near North Petherton (Langdon, forthcoming, 1988). These indicate cultivation at some date in the past, but not necessarily in medieval times. Much more work is still needed to be conducted on the chronological matters as well as analysis of the distributions themselves. At the time of writing investigations are proceeding at the County Planning Office, Taunton, involving the records of sites revealed through

field observations and by means of air photography. The principal areas of land reclamation identified at the present time are all indicated on Figure 6, together with the main embankments, new watercourses and the towns existing c. 1400.

There is some support for the view that the distribution pattern of new or improved holdings must have been influenced by the availability of land suitable for improvement. Manors which were already intensely cultivated would provide little opportunity for assarts and new tenancies and Taunton, an old established manor on very fertile land, may have been in this category (Dunning, 1978, 14). Very hilly, or heavily-wooded terrain such as that occurring on the Mendip and Quantock Hills, would not be a practicable proposition for improvement. An interesting comparison can be seen from another part of England in Harley's investigation which uses the Hundred Rolls of 1277-79 to compare population numbers and named sites in the Warwickshire Rolls with Domesday details (Harley, 1958, 8-18). Harley found that population density increased fourfold in areas described as "waste" in 1086; but in previously-well settled districts the demographic growth was much less, varying from a mere two per cent to around twenty four per cent.

The landholding organisation

This theme of reclamation and assarting needs to be examined in the light of the current landholding conditions and organisation and the contemporary economic and financial constraints of the landholders and peasants. No uniform relationship between landholding and social systems seems to have ever existed, even within a region as small as central Somerset. Records for the region reveal many variations, but with a continuing trend towards independent landholdings and a movement towards a cash economy. A

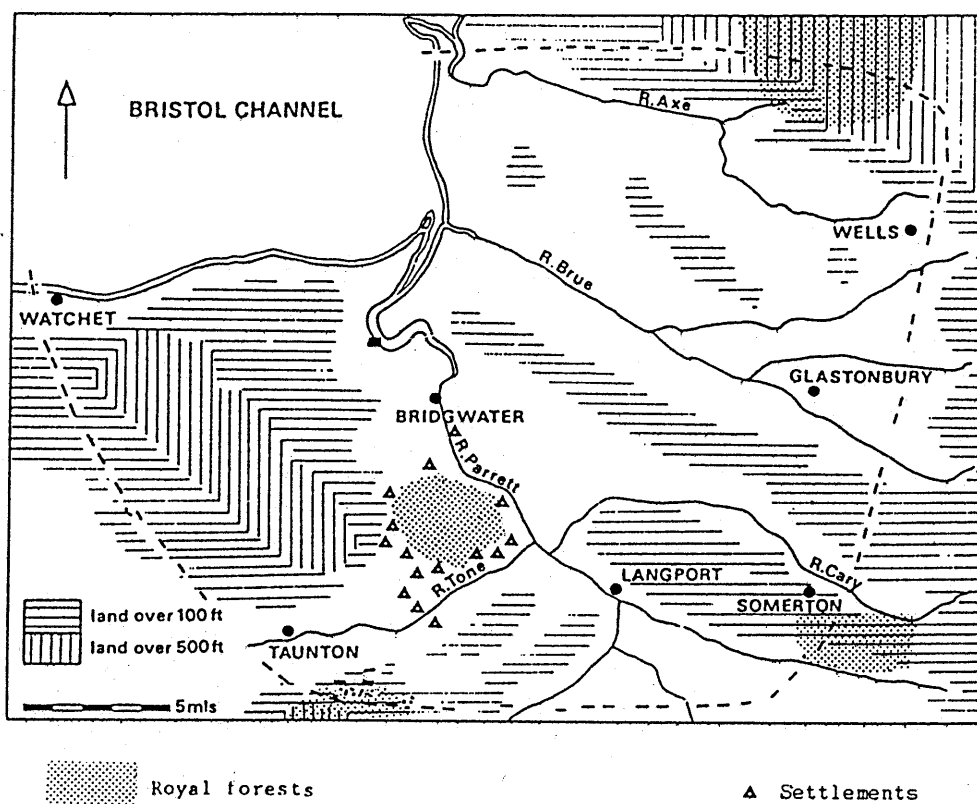


Fig. 8. Royal forests and settlements wrongly
afforested at the thirteenth century

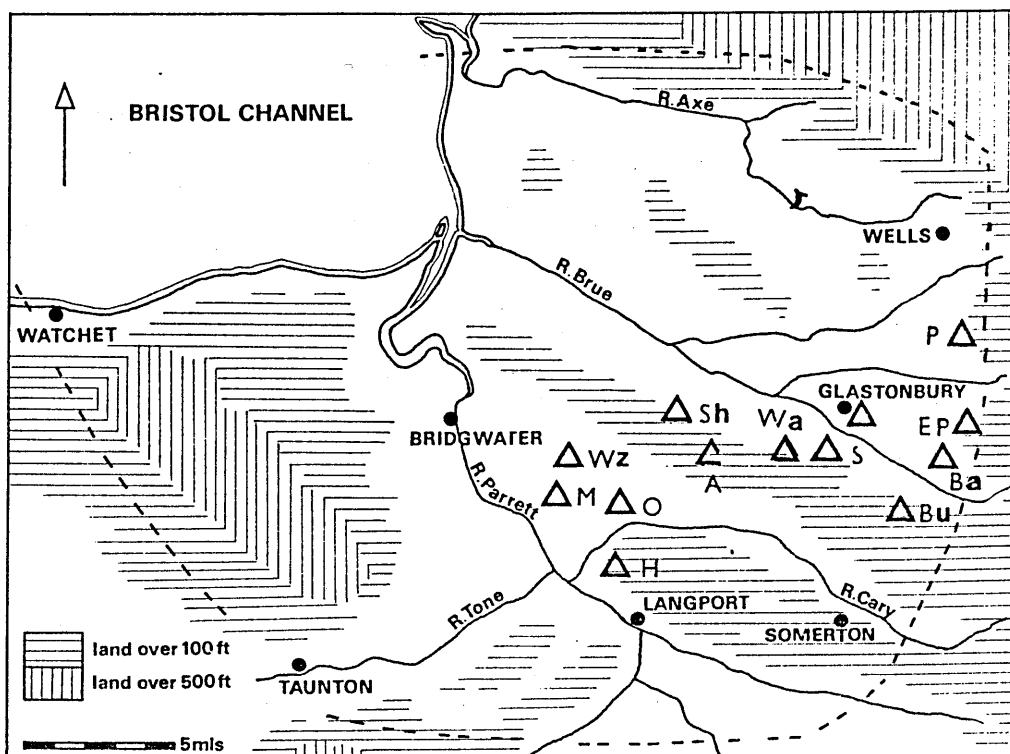


Fig. 9. Glastonbury manors directly managed in the twelfth century

△ Listed manors (after Postan, 1956)

A: Ashcott
 Ea: Baltonsborough
 Bu: Butleigh
 E.P.: East Pennard
 Glastonbury
 H: Ham
 M: Middlezoy
 O: Othery
 P: Filton
 Sh: Shapwick
 S: Street
 Wa: Walton
 Wz: Westonzoyland

constant struggle over peasant rights and conditions is also apparent throughout the whole period dealt with in this thesis.

Despite the few illegal occupations and the disafforestation on the Mendip slopes already mentioned, the royal parks and forests, Mendip, Petherton and Neroche, covered considerable areas of land. Indeed, some settlements were alleged to have been first illegally occupied for forestry by the orders of Henry I in the twelfth century and not made free for occupation until the seventeenth century (Collinson, 1791, 59-60). Figure 8 shows the extent of the royal parks and forests at the end of the thirteenth century and, also, those settlements reported to have been wrongly encroached under Henry I.

Although at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 and during the twelfth century some land on the Glastonbury Abbey estates was 'farmed' out to tenants and managers for profit (Morris, 1980. 336-46), such holdings formed only a minority (nine out of a total of thirty eight) of the Abbey manors. The locations of these managed manors are shown on Figure 9, and these were under the direct control of the Abbot's officials. An examination of these holdings, as they existed in the mid-thirteenth century, shows that the feudal structure of landholding, social caste and conditions of service still prevailed. Obligations to undertake military service applied to many landholders and, at this time, estate workers were still described as 'natives'. Possibly these men were the descendants of the serfs and freedmen recorded as living here at the time of the Domesday survey. There was little evidence of the existence of free tenants except, most significantly, on reclaimed land (Lennard, 1956, 355-64, Postan, 1956, 106, Elton, 1891, Intro & 239). For other manors at that time, the published Feet of Fines contain accounts of villeinage service and, also of the enforced transfer of

villeins with their families, landholding and chattels when manorial land was transferred or land management changed (Green, 1892, xxiv).

A different picture emerges from a study of the Pipe Rolls of the Exchequer dated 1170 which covers some of the Bishop of Winchester's estates in various parts of England, including Somerset. In these particular records little demesne farming is recorded, demesne lands being worked in return for paid wages whilst earlier obligations to provide labour services for the landlord had been commuted for cash (Page, 1911, 272, Titow, 1969, 60). Moreover, a study of Glastonbury manors during the same period has interpreted reductions in the number of demesne plough teams as a sign that the land was being leased for rent (Postan, 1953, 358). Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the appropriateness of this conclusion has been questioned (Lennard, 1956, 355-64). In Somerset the existence of wage earners and of tenants on reclaimed land (paying rents in cash or in the form of produce) can be noted. These features can be regarded as signs of a modest measure of personal freedom whilst, at the same time, suggesting the beginnings of the trend towards a cash economy.

By 1184 there was a return to direct demesne farming and, on the Bishop of Winchester's estates labour services under the control of the landlord's officers had taken the place of many leases (Harvey, 1974, 345-53). Similarly, in Somerset, a tightening of feudal controls was experienced in the thirteenth century. On ecclesiastical lands the authorities abolished the system of "farming out" to individuals who worked the holding for profit, and direct control by bailiffs was re-imposed (Elton, 1891, 239, Postan, 1956, 106). Monastic granges were established on marginal land at Wedmore, Woolavington and Cleeve, where the use of lay labourers was controlled by monks (Cantor, 1982, 116).

During the late twelfth century it was reported that the manors of Glastonbury Abbey had experienced laxity of control. This may have been the underlying reason for the noticeable surge in land reclamation schemes and for improvement in later times and, in particular, for the "farming out" of holdings and the movement towards the payment of wages for labour and the renting out of holdings - in short the principal reason for the movement towards a rural economy based on cash transactions rather than kind. The loosening of estate controls had created the conditions for illegal assarting and the 'squatting' on the so-called waste lands by the local peasantry (Postan, 1953, 358, Williams, 1970, 39). Also important was the particular political and economic context of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries - a period of financial instability with consequent heavy tax demands which, in turn, had led to serious shortages of ready cash.

Moreover, in one particular instance a loss of favour with King John resulted in large tax demands and severe cash shortages for the the Glastonbury manors in 1205 (Elton, 1891, xx). Landholders, therefore, tended to condone illegal assarting and improvement in return for payments of rent, and tenants on such land were required to perform duties in maintaining dykes and causeways (Dunning, 1978, 13, Page, 1911, 272, Sabin, 1971, 191). Reasons for the later tightening of administration and the return to demesne farming can be found in the abbey records - a decline in the income from manors as a result of a lax administration, and the problems of illegal encroachment on waste. Other considerations include a desire to derive much more profit from demesnes after the period of civil unrest, and, because of rising wage rates, a preference for direct labour services (Postan, 1956, 106, Watkin, 1944, 9, Morgan, 1979, 44). In addition the change towards the keeping of livestock - in

particular sheep for their wool - is seen by some scholars as an explanation for the reduction in demesne arable land (Lennard, 1956, 355-64). The appointment of bailiffs to three manors (Banwell, Axbridge and Compton) under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Wells in 1332 was roughly contemporary with the bishop's change of policy towards disafforestation, and the encouragement of assarting and enclosures on the Mendip Hills. A financial incentive may be suggested for these developments (Scott-Holmes, 1896, iv & 407, Hobhouse, 1887, 73).

Efforts to coerce labourers for work on the demesne led rapidly to social unrest and eventually revolt. Manor court rolls, pleas and abbey records contain arguments about the legal definition of fixed custom and these are indicative of growing resentment at the re-imposition of forced labour, manorial taxes and dues. Manorial claims for the return of villeins are recorded, together with the sale or transfer of unfortunate villeins, their families and goods and chattels (Hilton, 1973, 32-81, 88-91, Page, 1911, 292, 296). In consequence, provided villeins could manage to stay away from the manor for a year and a day and so escape enforced return, towns and trading centres now began to attract the rural peasantry to better paid jobs and improved living conditions.

In central Somerset, an area of mixed farming not entirely dependent on arable produce, the need for meadow and grazing land for livestock is a major and continuing factor influencing land improvement, land management, and private profit. From Domesday onwards good-quality meadowland was of great importance and generated up to four times the rental of pasture (Elton, 1891, 196, Dunning, 1978, 13-14). This meadow and pasture is still, and always has been, the subject of much dispute. During the Middle Ages rights of pasture existed, including the rights of freeholders to

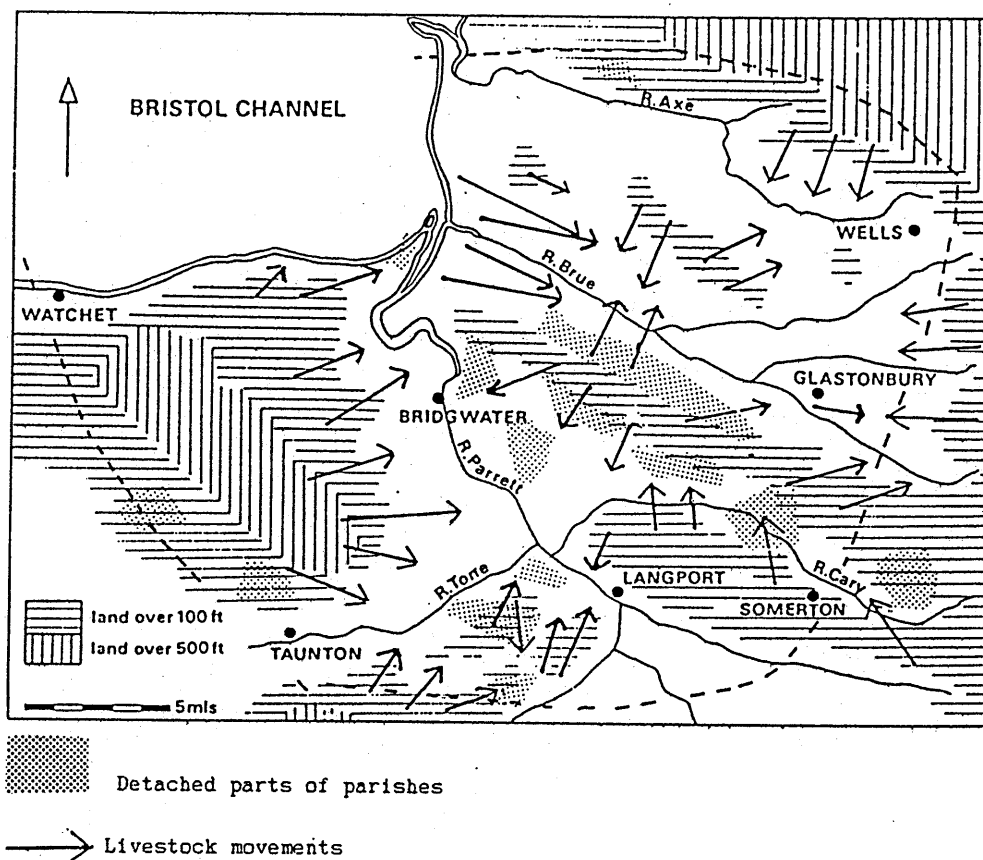


Fig. 10. Intercommoning arrangements and detached parts of parishes remaining at the sixteenth century

pasture as many animals as they wished, and under the long standing, but undefined, custom of 'intercommoning' animals were driven for considerable distances to these pastures from the villages (Williams, 1970, 90). Landholders, in particular the Bishop of Wells and the Abbots, possessed rights of common pasture which they guarded jealously (Green, 1892, 192, Watkin, 1944, 1948 & 1949). Manor lords also enjoyed the right to take in cattle for fattening on the common pastures and this brought them ready cash (Charter, 1910, 86). Complaints of overgrazing, land transactions and long standing disputes resulted and these are recorded in the Rolls of the Itinerant Justices and the Feet of Fines during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Landon, 1921 & 1929, Chadwyck-Healey, 1897, 292, 301). Figure 10 indicates something of the livestock movements generated by the use of these rights of pasture. Such arrangements still existed in the sixteenth century and, in fact, the grazing areas on the moors were still accepted as detached parts of the distant parishes and were recorded as such much later in a map of 1822 (Williams, 1970, 90, Fig. 13). Some of these ancient boundaries can still be traced on the maps of the present century.

In the past attempts were made to establish grazing boundaries. Under the Statute of Merton in 1235 lords were entitled to make enclosures on the common waste, if this was not required for use by the animals of the 'free' tenants. But the making of enclosures on the Mendips, in the Brue valley and at Saltmoor near Axbridge, in particular, caused resentment: riots and occasional damage to property ensued (Williams, 1970, 32-37, Chadwyck-Healey, 1897, 80-150, 23 instances). Arguments arose about the qualification of a freeman. One definition given was that a freeman was one who could attend the public court and whose land could be sub-divided at his death. Another qualification seems to have been that a freeman was a

person holding at least thirty acres of land. After country-wide complaints the Statute of Westminster, 1285, extended rights of pasture to those permitted to graze beasts on common land, but complaints and disputes did not cease (Morgan, 1979, 48, Scammell, 1974, 527, Page, 1911, 282, Chadwyck-Healey, 1897, 151-60). Despite these land controversies, the records do show some common interest in land improvement and a measure of cooperation between landlord and tenant on occasions when dykes were raised "by common consent" (Green, 1892, 324-404, Chadwyck-Healey, 1897, 151-60).

The woollen industry

Behind the grazing problems lay another factor - the second matter of great importance in central Somerset- the production of wool from sheep and the weaving of woollen cloth. The importance of this industry to Somerset, as well as to the country as a whole, warrants an examination in detail of the production, marketing and export of these materials. This is essential if we are to understand the effect of the industry on the regional economy of Somerset and its impact on the management of resources, the prosperity of individuals and the ensuing social changes.

Trade in wool and cloth had been developed through a network of markets, towns and ports, such as Langport (Bush, 1985, 16-19). During this period a coarse type of wool was produced in most parts of Somerset and, in 1341, production was assessed as amounting to 601 sacks per annum, more than any other county in south west England and equal in value to the wool production from the Cotswolds (Power, 1941, 109-113, Dunning, 1978, 11). Domesday entries record considerable flocks of sheep and, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries bailiffs' accounts contained reports of large-scale sheep farming on demesne lands, with increasing production over time. Many sheep flocks were reared on the reclaimed land of

the abbeys and on the manors of the Bishop of Wells (Scott-Holmes, 1896, 377, 381, Lennard, 1956, 355-64). Not very much is known as to the numbers of sheep kept by peasants, but an estimation made by Power in 1941 suggests that a national export of 30000-40000 sacks of wool per annum could not have been supplied from the monastic flocks alone. From this it is clear that a large number of smaller sheep owners must have existed and these must have contributed significantly to the total output. (Power, 1941, 24, Donkin, 1973, 159).

The importance to the country's economy of the wool trade is indicated by the imposition of customs duties on these products in 1274. Further political action followed in 1325, when aliens were restricted to purchasing wool in the specified "staple" towns where the merchandise had to remain for at least forty days after purchase. A system developed involving wool agents, middlemen, merchants, shipowners, customs duties, special ports licensed to export wool and, later, alnage accounts and records of cloth production and exports. All these developments reveal that there existed a well organised industry of national importance.

The marketing of wool and, from the thirteenth century onwards finished cloth, had developed from a trade dominated by the large estates and contracts between managers or bailiffs with foreign merchants. The rising middle classes controlled a network of local and larger town markets for the smaller producers (Power, 1941, 46-47, Pelham, 1936, 230, Carus-Wilson, 1950/1, 162, Bridbury, 1977, 397). These two systems were in operation concurrently and wool exports reached a peak between the late thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth centuries. By the fourteenth century the large demesne flocks began to decline in numbers as significant changes took place. Two reasons have been suggested for this: (1) the delays in

sales to foreign purchasers through retention of wool in the 'staple' deposits resulted in the loss of large contracts; exporters who had to wait for their cash were discouraged; (2) there developed a growing tendency to lease land for rent rather than to farm directly; thereafter wool production came to be based largely on peasant flocks on rented land (Baker, 1973, 221, Power, 1941, 47).

As time went on wool from Somerset was diverted to the growing home textile industry which, being well established by the end of the thirteenth century, was to gain ground as the manufacturing industry was freed from foreign competition (Lloyd, 1977, 116). Thus, woollen cloth became an important national export and this new growing trade followed similar routes to that taken by the raw wool itself, through Bristol, Bridgwater and the Dorset ports (Atthill, 1955, 24, Carus-Wilson & Coleman, 1963, 239, Fig. 51). Alnage accounts (kept by the official who sealed payments for cloth) indicate that, up to the early fourteenth century, Somerset's annual production of cloth was amongst the highest in England (Atthill, 1955, 24). Fulling mills were established in a number of towns in central Somerset, at, for example, Bridgwater, Taunton (as early as 1239), Langport, Cheddar, Wells, Glastonbury, Croscombe, and Wiveliscombe (Figure 11). These mills were sometimes "farmed out" for rent if under manorial control or, as in Taunton, an absentee landlord may have enabled a mill to function without obligations (Hunt, 1956/7, 89-105). Weavers, also, found employment in some of the larger urban establishments (Miller, 1965, 68).

Changing locations saw the migration of the textile industry from the towns to the countryside during the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. These locational changes have been described as the so-called "industrial revolution" of the thirteenth century, when

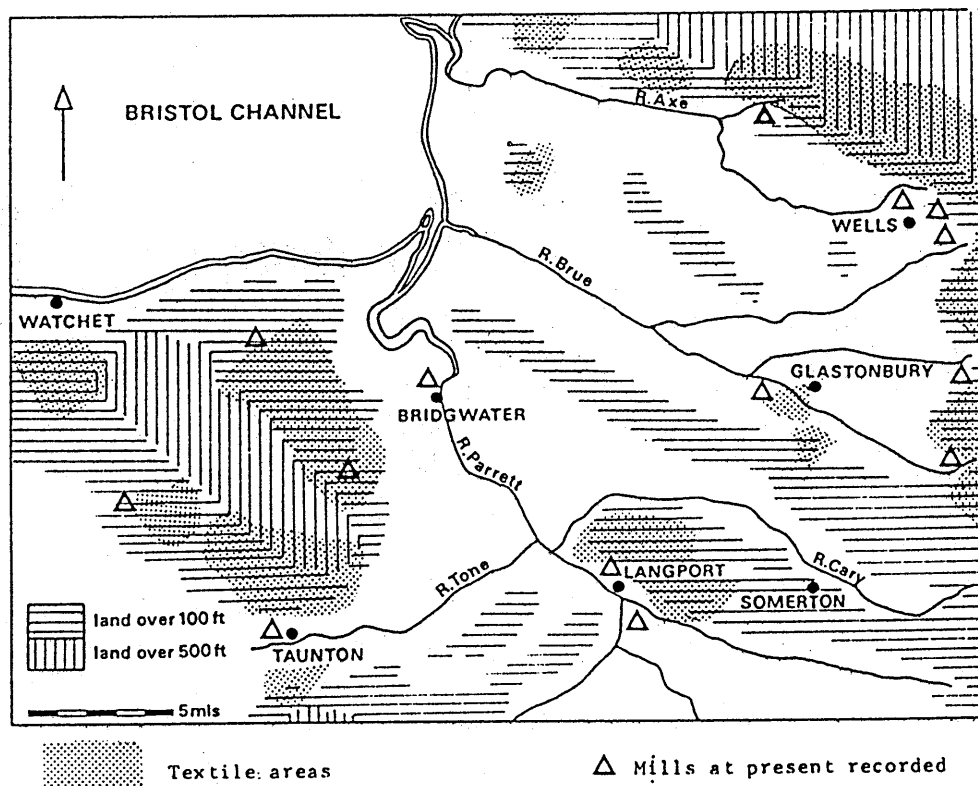


Fig. 11. Fulling mills and main fifteenth century areas of cloth production

water-powered fulling mills replaced the old foot fulling method. Whenever suitable water power was available fulling mills spread into the countryside - and central Somerset was well supplied with streams and rivers. Several other factors contributed to the movement of the industry. Landholders could 'farm' mills for rent and the burdensome restrictions of the town guilds encouraged those with land and capital, landlords, estate managers and entrepreneurs, to set up in business on property at rural locations (Carus-Wilson, 1941, 39-40, Cipolla, 1976, 161, Pelham, 1936, 251, Ponting, 1980, 12). Moreover, labour was available from villagers who must have found the work a useful supplement to their agricultural wages. Additional employment was to be obtained in the west country with clothiers who bought wool, paid villagers to do the fulling and weaving and then marketed the cloth (Butlin, 1978, 143).

Prosperity; and failure

The question must be asked "who received the major part of the profits?" Localities and persons profiting either from land reclamation or from the wool and textile trade may occasionally be recognised from surviving manorial court and justices' rolls, from tax and alnage records and, in Bridgwater at least, from borough archives of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and from published wills. All these documents contain the names of merchants and values of cloth (Dilks, 1920, 88-92 & 1933). The Close Rolls for the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, transcribed and held in the Somerset Record Office, also contain much detail on the woollen trade, duties paid and details of merchants. Non-literary sources can be helpful, particularly in the rural districts: manors or farmhouses dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and moated sites are currently being investigated (Aston, 1982, 132-133, Williams & Gilson, 1981, 45-66, Gilson, 1985, 129-39). These buildings are now considered to be evidence of a growing rural class with money and pretensions to better status and

housing (Cantor, 1981, 141). Churches show signs of stone rebuilding and enlargement, even before the great surge of church and tower building of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. All these non-literary sources provide artefactual evidence of the growing diffusion of wealth through the countryside of Somerset.

In general it was the towns and ports that enjoyed the greatest profits of this industry and its trade. Fairs and markets brought in money and, in addition to textiles, court rolls and borough archives record salt, timber, corn, cattle, woad, stone and iron (Dilks, 1933, 81, 330, 338, Dunning, 1978, 20). Bridgwater and Langport, amongst other river ports, collected tolls on goods trans-shipped. However, some towns complained of reduced prosperity and blamed this on the movement of industry and workers to the villages. For instance, Bristol manufacturers registered a loss of trade because fulling work was being taken out of the city to mills in the Mendip Hills (Carus-Wilson, 1950/1, 187, Miller, 1965, 69). An investigation into the relative prosperity of the smaller towns of Somerset shows that some were not doing as well as they felt they should be doing and the taxation returns of 1327, 1340 and 1377 can be used to estimate the relative positions of these towns in the urban hierarchy of the time (Dunning, 1968, 10-13). Dunning concluded that some small settlements such as Downend, Montacute and Newport (which had been 'planted' by local lords) had failed to grow into commercial centres. The Saxon "burh" of Lyng had declined into a small hamlet and Nether Stowey and Somerton had failed to grow significantly. All these sites are indicated on Figure 7.

Many reasons have been suggested for these failures. One factor of major importance appears to be a general lack of access to trade routes, major markets and ports but examination of the location of the failed towns and their position in relation to the trade routes shows

that this cannot be the only reason. Further causes - economic, political and personal - must be sought.

During the two and a half centuries following the Domesday Survey central Somerset experienced increased settlement and activity, both agricultural and industrial, but with marked spatial variations. Developments in the economy and in the control of resources which accompanied these changes have been discussed. The scene was beginning to alter and we see signs of the changes and problems to come in later generations. In 1300 large feudal estates were still operating in the old way in the hands of lords and abbots; common field systems were still in operation, particularly in the south and east of the region. But the number of free tenants was increasing as land was reclaimed and financial considerations encouraged manorial lords to rent holdings and permit villeins to commute labour services in return for a fee. (Page, 1911, 289). Amongst the peasantry there was a strong desire for independence of production and for freedom of action, increased, with the production of wool and cloth at home in the villages, by opportunities to augment rural incomes.

The towns and trading settlements provided an outlet for produce and at the same times functioned as diffusion channels of news, providing opportunities to hear about places and events away from the village. They also presented temptations to rural workers to escape from the restrictions of the manors with alternative employment offering higher pay and better conditions. Court rolls of the time contain accounts of numerous claims by manorial lords for return of villeins from towns or textile centres (Page, 1911, 189-90). Some of these urban centres still remained under manorial control: examples include Taunton, within the manorial centre of the Bishop of Winchester and the river ports on the Axe, part of the Glastonbuey estates. Others, such as Bridgwater, with a charter from King John, managed

their own affairs and finances quite separately to the authorities of the castle which adjoined the town. Although municipal organisation was rather vague until the 1468 mayoralty charter, Bridgwater operated under a borough court and the burgesses constituted a community with their own rights and possessions, not least the valued privilege of the right to transfer property (Dilks, 1917, 63, Platt, 1976, 27-28, Naish, 1969, 78-81).

The rise of a trading and industrial middle class has been noted, both in town and country. Entrepreneurial landholders, clothiers, merchants and those with large holdings and flocks of sheep achieved greater money profits in the new cash economy and this they used to buy more land and to build prestigious houses in town and country (Dilks, 1917, 63, Pevsner, 1958, 20-193, Cantor, 1982, 19). Conversely, those without the means to increase their wealth formed a class of landless wage labourers. Moreover, employees in the large establishments of fullers and clothiers were held as tied labourers and, in general, peasants moving into the towns could not have achieved full burgess status or membership of guilds (Miller, 1965, 68).

In spite of the apparent growth and prosperity, writers have recognised an economic and agricultural crisis in Europe in the early fourteenth century, some fifty years before the dramatic events that were to follow. Famines in 1315/17 resulting from a series of poor harvests are evident from the tithe records of the Nonarum Inquisitiones. Moreover, abandoned holdings, economic stagnation, contraction of arable and demesne land were all reported at the same time (Kershaw, 1973, Baker, 1966, 518, Morgan, 1979, 46, Postan, 1973, 13). Amongst other factors, the underlying causes have been identified as a reduction in the size of landholdings, overpopulation, poor weather conditions for growth and harvesting together with an agricultural technology which had not responded to needs created by substantial

population increases (Postan, 1973, 15, Duby, 1968, 123-24). In addition, because abbots and bishops were accused of possessing wealth, private armies and large numbers of retainers, political and social factors may also have been of considerable importance.

These alleged extravagances, and the taxes passed on by landholders to their tenants, threw a burden on the primary producers. An examination of manor court rolls for manors in the See of Winchester, which, in the thirteenth century, covered various parts of England, reveals much of contemporary conditions. From these reports of lowered rents and land fines and excusals given to "poor people" it can be concluded that, in some places at least, rural poverty existed. (May, 1973, 399, Titow, 1969, 64-94). In consequence, an accumulation of political factors and agricultural difficulties has been suggested as the major underlying cause of economic crisis (Bridbury, 1977, 395, Wagstaff, 1978, 165-78, Miller, 1975, Maddicott, 1975). However, it should be noted that the records are scanty and, except in some particular areas, may not provide sufficient information to prove clear evidence of population decline and/or economic disaster. Moreover, it has been argued that overpopulation and overproduction may have existed only in a few regions, such as parts of midland England and some long established and much more fully cultivated manors, where arable open field systems predominated. Even in these areas the idea that land had been exhausted through overcropping has been challenged. In the common three-field system a period of fallow was usually followed and normally beasts were grazed on unused land. It might well have been the case that small divided fields lost fertility if no livestock, or very few, were held: marginal land could quickly be subject to erosion and acidity without adequate attention and manure (Bennett, 1979, 78). Where a more mixed economy was practised and where livestock was important, and also where the textile industry was prosperous, as in

central Somerset, no significant decrease in prosperity or production has been observed (Bridbury, 1977, 393-94, Watts, 1967, 543-47, Dodgshon, 1978, 103, Page, 1911, 279).

Postan has proposed that the demographic, economic and agricultural factors discussed in this chapter can be regarded as the main causes of the subsequent social conflicts of the fourteenth century (Postan, 1973, 11). This view has been disputed by Brenner (1976, 30-35) who has concluded that pressure of population and lack of resources cannot be accepted as the primary causes. Instead, Brenner sees the crises as having arisen from long-term struggles for control over basic production and freedom of action; and conflicts between those who held land and wealth and those who did not. Thus human factors and attitudes and the social context need to be much more fully considered, rather than just the economic processes by which a particular class structure had been established. Brenner concluded "the structure of class power determines the manner and degree in which the demographic and trading changes will affect long term income and economic growth; not the other way round" (1976, 36). In central Somerset, an area in which, as we have seen, social and class disputes were a feature dominating the life of the community, this view is an important consideration when we come to examine changing circumstances in the succeeding centuries.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

The fourteenth century is infamous for the outbreak of the Black Death in 1349, followed by later outbreaks of the plague. This catastrophe needs to be seen in the context of the economic and social problems which had already arisen during the previous century. From contemporary reports it is clear that the plague was widespread with large numbers of deaths being recorded throughout the whole of western Europe. In England, a decrease of population has been recognised from comparisons of the Lay Subsidy returns of 1327, 1334 and 1377. The plague became endemic in the latter half of the century and it is now thought to have become an urban, rather than a rural, problem returning on a regional basis and intensified by crowded conditions and contagion (Bridbury, 1973, 577-591, Bean, 1962/3, 435, Baker and Harley, 1969, 69-71). The Black Death was diffused into Somerset through the ports and its effects lasted for some six months. Wills and rapid changes in ecclesiastical benefices and public offices suggest very high mortality levels in both town and country (Dilks, 1927, 22-23, Bates Harbin, 1917, 110, Charter, 1910, 86-96).

Somewhat surprisingly the plague produced only very minor areal effects in some villages where new tenants came forward to occupy vacant holdings. Court rolls contain some reports of neglect in the rural areas of Somerset but, in central Somerset at least, the documentary evidence shows that the recovery in cultivation began within a very few years of the first plague (Page, 1911, 290). One investigation has found that fifty fines were paid by new tenants in the small village of Chedzoy near Bridgwater during the two years following 1349 (Bates Harbin, 1917, 110). Examination of the records

of another manor reveals that, even when sixty-three out of one-hundred-and-fifty occupants of holdings had died, new tenants soon came forward (Charter, 1910, 86-96). Recently, it has been suggested that a large number of the landless poor, including cottars with only very small plots of land, must have comprised the lowest level of rural society and that these people must have taken these new opportunities to obtain holdings (Bridbury, 1973, 591). In addition, it does seem that existing tenants, perhaps with ready cash, took the opportunities created by high mortality levels to gain more land. The contemporary reports do not state whether these men were landless peasants or established peasant farmers anxious to enlarge their holdings.

Conditions on some manors at, least, did not change immediately after 1349, and new tenants were willing to accept admission to villeinage even with feudal services. Court rolls for a time recorded some increase in manorial dues and fines. It has been suggested that these new tenants were anxious to obtain plots vacant after the plague on any conditions (Charter, 1910, 96, Page, 1911, 291, Bates Harbin, 1917, 89-112). Inflation became a problem during the later fourteenth century, resulting from a shortage of labour and rising wages, linked, as the acreage of arable land decreased, to increasing grain prices. Some manors managed to continue in the customary way until the latter part of the century, sustaining their incomes by higher rents and prices. On the other hand, the manorial accounts show that some landholders, those competent and able to adapt to new conditions, were prospering. In other cases, attitudes of mind incapable of accepting and adjusting to the facts of loss of feudal rights are revealed: demesne profits were seriously reduced and on these occasions attempts were made to force tenants to perform services rather than pay the higher wage rates demanded. These attempts to enforce feudal

rights of labour, together with efforts to fix a maximum wage (as, for example, in the Statute of Labourers, 1351), caused much resentment and are thought by some writers to be a major cause of social revolt (Bridbury, 1973, 582-85, Butlin, 1978, 126, Pollard, 1972, 553-66). At this time, the monasteries were in financial difficulties and their estates were amongst the last to abandon traditional manorial services. In consequence, popular feeling against the religious houses, in particular, was to become heightened. The riots of 1381 in Bridgwater and Wellington are attributed principally to a local resentment and anti-religious sentiments (Dilks, 1927, 25-26, Page, 1911, 292).

The prevailing trends towards the renting of independent units of land and the commutation of labour services by a yearly fee was in existence long before the arrival of the plague but the opportunities to obtain freedom of choice had been increased by the sudden decrease in population and the ensuing economic and social changes. As it was to turn out, in the long run the peasantry were able to obtain holdings for rent and to withdraw their labour from the demesne. Flocks of sheep, as well as land, could be leased from landholders and this enabled tenants to make substantial profits. This system was to grow rapidly. Landholders found money to be of more use to them than unwilling workers so, particularly after the disturbances in 1381, demesnes were divided and leased, or turned to sheep farming - a land usage which did not require very much labour, but which brought in money as ready cash from wool contracts (Page, 1911, 293-95, Dunning, 1974, 44 & 1978, 15).

The manorial structure never recovered from the uprisings and disturbances of 1381 (Hilton, 1973, 130-70, 222-25). By the end of the fifteenth century, most demesne land, even on abbey estates, was rented (Dunning, 1978, 15), and by 1450 all demesnes were let to

tenants even on the manor of Canterbury (De Boulay, 1964/5, 443). This single development is recognised as one of the main factors leading in the direction of an eventual full cash economy, a changing pattern of landholding and then to a capitalist class system (Power, 1941, 47, 122, Cantor, 1982, 20). At the end of the previous chapter Brenner's hypothesis concerning the relationship between class structure and the nature of long-term income and economic growth was noted (Brenner, 1976, 36; see above p. 56). The growing power of the small independent farmers, traders and industrialists meant that, in the fourteenth century, changes were occurring in the class structures and in the economic system as it was to be known to future generations.

One interpretation of customs records has shown that, over the whole country, recurrent epidemics of plague had an adverse effect on the trade in wool and woollen cloth during the fourteenth century, and on the prosperity of towns, with consequent lower rents and wages (Bean, 1962/3, 423). Nevertheless, despite occasional recessions, port and customs records show that woollen textiles were to become an industry of major national importance between 1350 and the 1550s. The principal producing counties - Suffolk, Yorkshire, Somerset and Gloucestershire - are revealed in the Alnage accounts (Carus-Wilson & Coleman, 1963, 239, Atthill, 1955, 24, Lloyd, 1977, 115). The woollen industry in the central Somerset area reached a peak of production in the late fifteenth century, and the port of Bridgwater, ranking twelfth in England as a textile exporting port in 1420, handled its greatest volume of cloth in 1481/2. The cloth production of Somerset was amongst the highest in England with a yearly output of 10000 cloths, equalling that of Yorkshire and Suffolk in 1468 (Atthill, 1955, 24, Lloyd, 1977, 115). Taunton, Williton, Bridgwater, Bruton, Wells, Dunster, and Porlock had all been developed as textile centres as well

as the villages of Croscombe and Wookey (Dunning, 1978, 18,21). Langport was especially noticeable for the growth of its textile industry and trade at this time (Page, 1911, 294, Dunning, 1974, 16-19). The main cloth producing areas at the peak of the trade are indicated on Figure 11.

The economy of these towns was temporarily affected by the high levels of mortality created by the plague. In consequence, Bridgwater borough records reported shortages of labour for industry and building works, and it appears that high wage rates attracted workers from the villages to meet the local needs (Dilks, 1927, 24, Bridbury, 1973, 577-91).

But there is evidence on which to base a much more optimistic view of economic conditions in the fifteenth century. In part this is evident in the rebuilding of town houses and churches within a few years of the ending of the Black Death (Pevsner, 1958). Increases were noted in industry and trade and in the development of specialist industries such as pulp and gig mills, fulling, and woodworking (Blanchard, 1970, 420). In central Somerset, local sources, borough records and Close Rolls, indicate that most of the towns, apart from those already noted in decline (see Figure 7, page 33) continued to flourish. Ports were busy, with shipments of cloth, wine, wood, salt iron and coal. Properly organised market centres had replaced many local spasmodic fairs, and small industries such as glove making, ropeworks, wickerwork and quarrying were of growing importance (Page, 1911, 293-98, Dunning, 1978, 19-21). During this period of relative and increasing prosperity the Bridgwater town authorities, for instance, were able to start a major rebuilding programme on the church spire in 1367 despite reported labour shortages and high wage rates. The local archives at least contain no hint of troubles arising from disturbance or war. Moreover, Bridgwater is an example of the

towns which had managed to incorporate nearby manors and small settlements and the borough market replaced local fairs. (Dilks, 1927, 24 and 1938, 330, 338, 440).

Evidence of prosperity throughout the county can be seen from a study of lay wealth (from exchequer returns of taxes, and probate records in England) between 1334 and 1515 when, in terms of real wealth, Somerset rose from third in rank of counties in 1334 to first in 1515 (Schofield, 1965, 483-510). In common with Devon and Cornwall the county showed an increase in wealth of more than four hundred per cent over the two centuries. The Victoria County History states that whilst the fourteenth century records reveal a widespread discontent there existed little evidence of actual poverty; high wages and good prices for produce continued until the end of the century (Page, 1911, 292).

The availability of ready cash and the expectation of profit resulted in renewed activity in land reclamation and assarting of marginal land. Low-lying areas in the Parrett and Ivel valleys near Langport and around Glastonbury were drained by the abbey authorities and the land was used for sheep pasture (Williams, 1970, 40, 82-84, Fig. 12 below, p 64). The thriving wool and cloth industries encouraged the keeping of sheep with long term consequences which were manifest principally in the reduction of arable cultivation and in the enclosure of waste and common fields. A surge of interest in enclosure was apparent in the early fifteenth century, and again towards the end of that century, when the "hunger" for more land increased (Thirsk, 1964, 3-25, Beresford, 1954, 146). The enclosure movement brought some new benefits for villagers when with landlords they agreed that reclaimed marshland was to be allocated on the basis of the numbers of livestock owned (Thirsk, 1967, 74, and Cossington Parish Records). In addition, the improvements included work on sea

defences following flooding (Scott-Holmes, 1896, 151, 161, 166, 409). The appointment of an official body, the Commissioners of Sewers, to oversee drainage activities, indicates a new central government interest in such works.

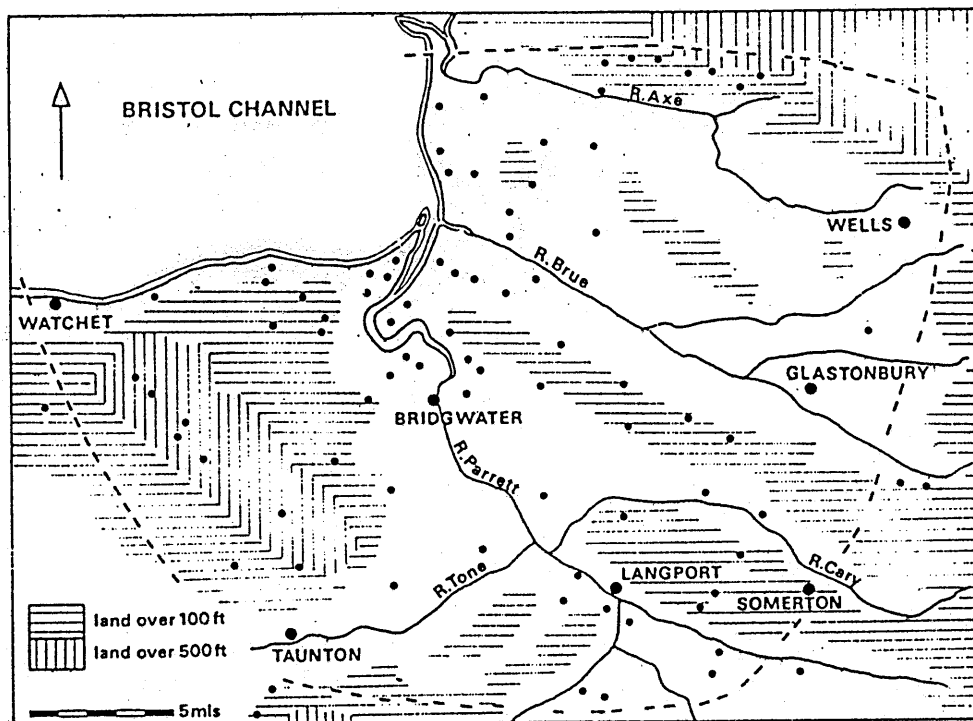
All these activities accentuated economic differences between the social classes. The freedom of action and the availability of land for obtaining or enlarging holdings resulted in increased wealth for those who had the opportunities and drive. Peasants who had obtained good demesne land were able to make profits, acquire more land and advance themselves on the social scale. Those who had no capital and, perhaps, little initiative, soon fell behind. It is thought that the pattern of large, independent holdings began at this time, coinciding with the emergence of the new rural classes of yeomen and husbandmen (Cantor, 1982, 20). The lessee of land was not necessarily a peasant: land was obtained (and used for profit) by those who had made money and were on the lookout for new investments. The middle classes, already existing in the previous century but of less significance, were growing fast (Elton, 1962, 239): so millers, town burgesses, traders, wool and cloth merchants and middlemen all acquired land and farmed, or leased it to others (Cantor, 1982, 22, Butlin, 1978, 139, Thirsk, 1964, 3-25). On the larger farming units a mixed farming economy with varied crops and livestock brought better returns (Thirsk, 1967, 72-74).

The western part of central Somerset, west of the River Parrett, appears to have been the first area to be affected by the enclosure movement. Here, as in neighbouring parts of Devon, the arable land may never have been in large fields because of the nature of the terrain and the many small separate settlements. Some scholars have concluded that the whole of this western region had been enclosed into small fields much earlier and certainly by the end of the fifteenth

century (Thirsk, 1967, 73, Fox, 1975, 199). Elsewhere in the county enclosure of arable and common land led to complaints about loss of employment and grazing rights, and, towards the end of the fifteenth century, the continuing demand for wool resulted in a severe shortage of land and a further acceleration of enclosure (Page, 1911, 298). By this date it was clear that the trend towards more enclosure of land was having serious effects on the lower classes, particularly as many labourers, so described as 'free, but poor', now began to experience acute poverty. (Smith, Cook & Hutton, 1970, 117). The records show that peasant farmers were forcibly moved off arable land that was now required for extensive pastoral farming or for the laying out of private parks and country estates. Widespread distress was brought on smallholders by their loss of grazing rights - the same rights and customs that had been the subject of much discussion and contention earlier. Those who had become destitute or who had lost their customary grazing rights became more and more impoverished so contributing to the growing drift of people from the countryside to the towns. Many accounts of discontent, of poverty and of neglected holdings and ditches can be found in the court rolls (Hobhouse, 1890, xv, Page, 1911, 292, 296).

Rural depopulation and migration were to become continuing problems during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The growing chorus of complaints led eventually to the abortive Acts of Parliament of 1489, 1515, and 1516, intended to stop the abandonment of holdings and massive out-migration from the villages (Thirsk, 1964, 3-25, & 1967, 207-11 & 217-19, Williams, 1970, 45-56, 91, Bridbury, 1974, 540, Page, 1911, 304, Beresford, 1954, 146).

The desertion of villages and the depopulation of the countryside during the later fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has been the subject of many studies. Published works list the sites of



• Major settlements so far located (many minor sites not marked)

Fig. 12. Location of shrunken or deserted settlements

abandoned or shrunken villages in Somerset, and at the time of writing much work is in progress in an attempt to locate and date former settlements (Aston & Burrow, 1982, 119- 132). The principal sites identified so far in central Somerset are shown on Figure 12 (Aston, 1982, 132, Fig. 13.11) but the picture must still be far from complete. Recent studies have shown that not all villages were deserted simply due to the enclosure of land for sheep farming, ejection of villagers, or because of the incidence of the plague. Many different reasons are now apparent: some hamlets were resited only a short distance away from their original locations, for instance, Crandon near Bridgwater. The reasons for this sort of movement are often unknown and may reflect behavioural factors. In the case of Crandon and the nearby abandoned villages of Horsey and Crook, both sited on level ground adjacent to the flood plain of the River Parrett, the cause may have been the worsening climate and flooding during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - but it is not yet possible to offer a fully conclusive explanation (Aston, 1985. 9-10). Some observers now conclude that the principal causes relate to a slow decline, due principally to continued out-migration to the towns (Beresford & Hurst. 1971, Dyer, 1982, 19).

In addition to growing rural problems, or, perhaps, partly because of these and the influx of villagers seeking work, some writers see a general slump in the economy of the mid-fifteenth century: towns now appeared less prosperous because of wars at home and abroad; income had been lost from corn markets because farmers had changed over to concentrate on livestock production; and textile manufacture and exports had been reduced (Cantor, 1982, 188). This apparent decline in trade and prosperity has been linked to the apparent gap in new church buildings between 1425 and 1475 (Postan, 1973, 43-46). Bridgwater complained to the Crown in the mid-fifteenth

century about reduced revenue and excessive taxation, but their plea was not supported by a Commission. It is of interest, however, that the town apparently gained some advantages from its complaints because, subsequently, the urban area was enlarged with new burgages for renting and, as a result, a new charter was granted with provision for the election of a mayor (Dilks, 1927, 30-32, 1938, xix-xx, & 99, & 1948, xi, xiii, 1445, & 1945).

Overall, however, it is clear that the county of Somerset increased in prosperity during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Much more empirical research is still required before a fuller understanding can be reached of the distribution of this wealth over space and time. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn at the present time. Bridgwater borough archives and the wills of the more prosperous inhabitants indicate growing material possessions and property in the town and in the surrounding countryside (Dilks, 1933, 330, 338 & 1920, 78-97, Weaver, 1901, 1903, 1905). Surveys conducted by the Historic Buildings Group of the Somerset Archaeological Society have revealed stone buildings of the period in many of the villages in central Somerset. These continuing researches should provide us with much more indirect evidence of the territorial distribution of wealth within the county (Williams & Gilson, 1977, 55-66, Hoskins, 1955, 44-59, Gilson, 1985, 129-39). In 1535 Leland noted that the towns of Somerset were "full of stone buildings" (Leland in Toulmin-Smith, 1964, 44-59). Detailed local field surveys will reveal traces of industry in the form of mill races, weirs and weavers' houses, and carvings in wood or stone on houses; and the grandeur or otherwise of the churches offers indications as to the relative importance of medieval industry and the general prosperity of particular localities.

A further indication of the distribution of surplus wealth in central Somerset may be obtained from studies which have been made of

the large-scale rebuilding of churches and church towers from the mid-fourteenth century onwards. Such rebuilding ceased abruptly in 1540 when the monasteries were dissolved and the state seized church properties for secular redistribution (Dunning, 1978, 35). Published wills show that bequests for such church repairs and buildings ceased, almost entirely, at the same time (Weaver, 1905). The maintenance of church towers and naves was, of course, the responsibility of the laity of the parish and very little assistance was received from abbots or bishops, even when the manor was in their possession (Hobhouse, 1890, 78-93). Some commentators have stated that the money for building came from the profits of the woollen textile trade, from the profits produced by improved methods of farming on the larger holdings and from the gentry and town merchants. Churchwardens' accounts at the time list monies raised through "church ales" and fairs and also record contracts placed with stonemasons. Carvings and memorials can be found with dedications to principal benefactors, lords of the manor, clothiers, weavers and merchants. For instance, an effigy on a tomb in the church at Huntspill is regarded as that of Sir Richard Cogan, a manorial lord listed in the list of Somerset Vills at 1315, who held a considerable amount of land along the coastal plain - and the rebuilding of that church is dated to the early fourteenth century. The reasons for this considerable expenditure of cash, time and energy have been much discussed and there have been many explanations offered including local patriotism, a status symbol for the local landowner or rich man, or pleas to religious conscience (Smith, Cook & Hutton, 1970, 117).

Comprehensive details of church buildings with their estimated dates have been published (Pevsner, 1958) and, more recently, an attempt has been made, concentrating especially on the church towers which form distinct groups in Somerset, to produce dated lists of

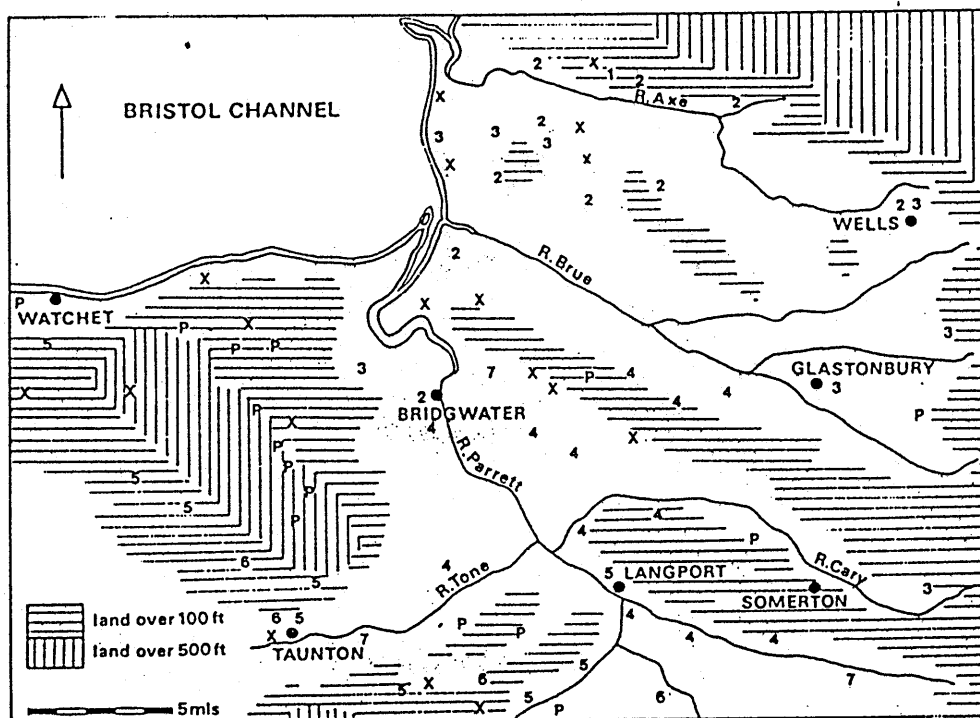


Fig. 13. Church tower rebuilding fourteenth to sixteenth centuries (Poyntz-Wright, 1981)

"Generations" of church towers:

1. 1360-1395
2. 1397-1435
3. 1421-1431
4. 1455-1470
5. 1480-1513
6. 1503-1515
7. 1530-1539

P Perpendicular style, date not agreed
 X Little or no apparent fifteenth/sixteenth century work

buildings. Once assembled this material evidence can then be used to identify the areas with relative high prosperity at different dates (Poyntz-Wright, 1981, 21-23). Figure 13 records the main results from the analysis of all these surveys. From this map it is clear that that there seems to be a development over time from north to south in the county, but there is, at present, no independent corroborative evidence to confirm that relative changes in prosperity moved in this particular way. Some observers conclude that ideas, influence and itinerant craftsmen simply moved southwards from Gloucestershire and Bristol.

Poyntz-Wright's methods have been criticised on the grounds that only a limited number of towers were included in these surveys and that insufficient numbers of diagnostic architectural variables were used. Moreover, the general assumption that an individual church building was completed within a few years is now shown to be inappropriate in many instances (Harvey, 1982, 168). It is noticeable, though, that as Figure 13 shows, the groups numbered 4 to 6, dated by Poyntz-Wright to 1455-1515, are most numerous around Bridgwater and Taunton. This particular period is thought to have been the period of maximum prosperity in central Somerset at that time (Dunning, 1978, 35, Havinden, 1981, 121-23). Figure 13 shows, also, those churches where there is little or no stonework of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and these are seen principally in inland settlements which have always been small, isolated and away from the major trade routes. These particular churches occur mainly in the western and southern parts of the study area where Tudor houses and parks predominate, a region of small settlements, marginal land and, at one time, with many royal and ecclesiastical holdings and buildings. The regional location of these particular churches may be an indication of places where for some unknown reason money for rebuilding was not readily forthcoming.

At the end of the fifteenth century the social structure of central Somerset was still predominantly patriarchal with wealth and production controlled by those who held property or land, or possessed ready cash. Those with land, the entrepreneurs and the wealthy bourgeoisie formed an opposing force to the labourers and the landless (Hilton, 1973, 232-35). It seems very likely that, in the climate of opinion of the day there was no real political will to challenge the growth of the capitalist economy and this was to have serious resultant consequences for rural areas and the working population (Yelling, 1978, 151-53). Overall, by the end of the fifteenth century the pattern of landholding and management appears to have changed completely, giving rise to a new division of classes, to great wealth on the one hand and to the new problems of acute poverty and landless migrants. In other words, the gaps between those who 'had' and the poorer classes were accentuated greatly by the early 1500s.

CHAPTER V

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The close of the fifteenth century has been selected as a significant date for the research on which this thesis is based because this particular time marks what historians recognise as the end of the 'Middle Ages' and leads to the beginnings of the modern world. Even though the developments, both economic and social, noted in the previous chapters are seen to continue, new ideas and influences at home and abroad increase in importance and the processes of change are accelerated.

Production of woollen textiles and the export of cloth reached a peak around 1500 (Cipolla, 1976, 165, Bowden 1962, 45). The demand for woollen cloth resulted in many more flocks of sheep and much more enclosure of land for pasture. In the countryside, complaints continued about these enclosures and, in 1516, the economic damage suffered by smallholders became the subject of T. Moore's *Utopia*. The enlargement of farms and other properties still continued but the general pattern had become one of independent farming. In almost all parts of Somerset the enclosures of the late fifteenth century resulted in a landscape of small fields; yet, as some writers point out, open fields and commons survived in some eastern and central parts (for example, Westonzoyland and Newton in the Parrett valley, Long Load near Langport and in the still undrained lowlands and the coastal plains of the Brue valley). But these tended to be the exceptions (Thirsk, 1967, 73). A recent study of the medieval fields of south-east Somerset concludes that the open field system in these districts progressively disintegrated throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Whitfield, 1981, 17-30). These conclusions are supported, as we have noticed in the previous chapter, by Leland's report in 1535 when he commented that enclosed fields still

existed in all parts of south Somerset and everywhere west of the River Parrett (Toulmin-Smith, 1964, 155, 167).

Throughout England the establishment of the Tudor dynasty marked the cessation of civil war and a change towards a more stable and firmer governmental control. Conversely in Europe new applications of technology to shipping (including the full rigged ship and the quadrant) enabled merchant adventurers to undertake voyages across the Atlantic and to India. Soon English merchants were to hear of the voyages of Christopher Columbus, (1492), and Magellan's voyage around the world (1519). In consequence their imaginations were soon fired by the possibilities of trade and by stories of 'precious metals' from Spanish America. Improved overland communication and by sea enabled people to learn something of the conditions and problems of the outside world. Traditional ideas of astronomy, property and religion were being challenged. The Church, in particular, was accused of laxity and avarice and, by the early sixteenth century, had lost much of its earlier support. In England, an interest in the conditions of the country, its inhabitants and its prosperity generated a number of new topographical accounts by travellers such as Leland (1535), (Toulmin-Smith, 1964).

By this time the invention of the printing press must be seen as a major factor influencing the spread of information and the diffusion of new ideas. From 1476, when Caxton commenced printing in England, books and pamphlets were circulated in greater numbers on many different subjects including social, religious and economic matters. Books dealing with travel, humanism, poetry and drama flourished especially in the later part of the century during the reign of Elizabeth (Elton, 1962, 187, 433). In addition, Shakespeare's plays reflect an increasing popular interest in overseas exploration (Twelfth Night Act 3, Scene 2). This is also evident in the first appearance of maps of the New World (Hakluyt, 1582, Woodward, 1975, 1-2). Furthermore, printing made

available reliable copies of these maps reducing the possibilities of error and alteration in hand copying. By the early seventeenth century the growing obsession with England as the home country and its trade routes can be observed in the appearance of county and road maps delineating the principal overland routes radiating from London, with much detail on towns, villages, hills and bridges en route (Speed, 1611).

This ever increasingly optimistic situation must be viewed as the essential background and context to the spatial and social changes occurring in the sixteenth century. The sources of data available for this period are in some ways different from those of the previous centuries and this, in itself, reflects prevailing conditions and attitudes. Falling numbers of monks and persons in Holy Orders and poor management in the monasteries resulted in inadequate ecclesiastical records and the monastic registers cease after the Dissolution of 1535 (Williams, 1970, 82). On the other hand, new government documents in the form of Acts of Parliament, reports of commissions, muster rolls, tax returns and customs and alnage accounts, become much more numerous. Parish registers were instituted by Thomas Cromwell in 1536 but a few survive from an earlier date. Borough and Justices' records exist and churchwardens' and overseers' accounts provide information for the later part of the century (Elton, 1973, 160, & 1962, 200). The values of Elizabethan England, such as the emphasis placed on individual wealth, property and especially land, is revealed in the large volume of surviving surveys, inventories, property deeds and wills (Weaver, 1905, Bettey, 1977, 51-54). In Somerset, lists of enrolled deeds of property transactions from 1536 onwards have been published (Bates Harbin, 1936, 89-113). These record the titles and occupations and reveal something as to the social status of the persons involved - yeoman, gentleman, knight, clothier, mercer, husbandman.

Landholding and management

The situation existing in the early part of the century was materially affected by several major considerations which, as in England as a whole, were to have lasting effects in central Somerset. The first of these was the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. As we saw in the previous chapter the transfer and/or sale of monastic possessions and, later, of the contents of chapelries resulted in a far reaching reallocation of church land and property to the state and to prominent lay owners. These developments came about as a consequence of major shifts in men's ideas and attitudes to religion and property. Growing inflationary pressures and the economic difficulties that the Tudor state was beginning to face provided the context for all these radical developments (Platt, 1976, 214-16). Religious institutions fell into decline and soon were to experience a severe loss of public support. The ecclesiastical manorial system had already ended with almost all demesne land having been leased out for grazing by 1500 and tenants and local gentry were anxious to obtain possession of more and more of this land (Dunning, 1974, 44). In 1536 some local complaints and riots about the closure of hospitals and friaries are recorded in Somerset, mainly from those who stood to lose shelter and charitable assistance, but these protests were to have no significant influence on the changing circumstances of the church. (Dunning, 1978, 37).

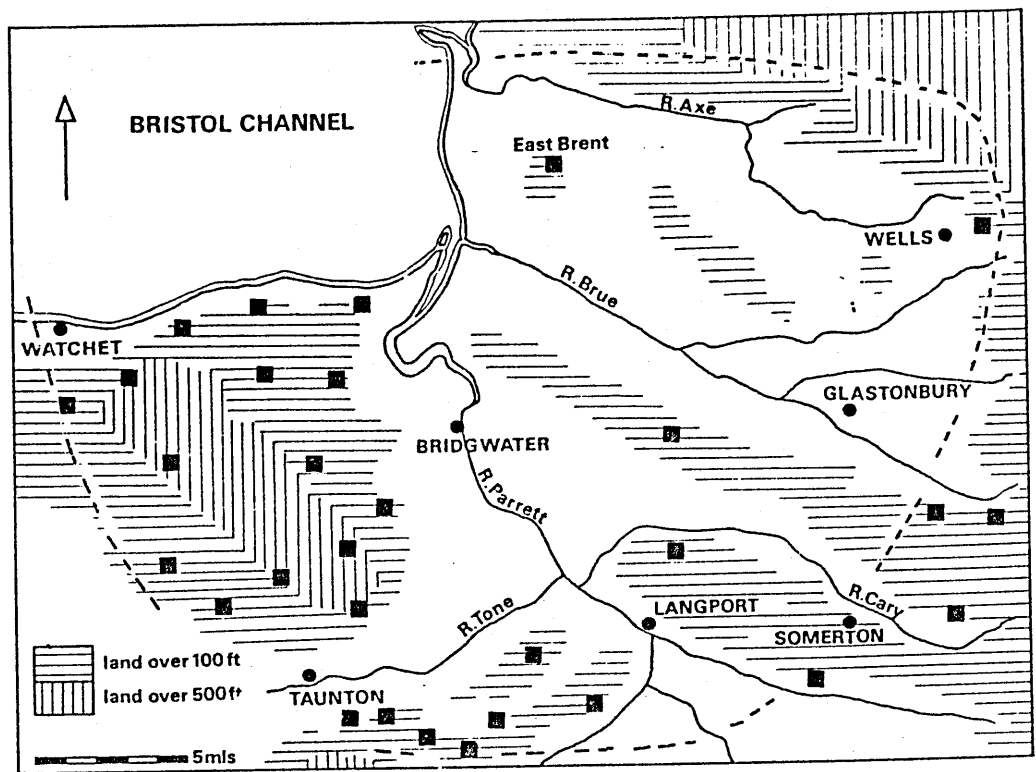
In Somerset monastic property was extensive and the exact procedures for the disposal of this property with full details of the recipients are recorded by Wyndham (1979, 65-73). At the first distribution of properties, the major share went to those who were most influential at Court (Seymour, Duke of Somerset, acquired large estates) as well as to officials and the Army. The local recipients included royal commissioners living in the county, sheriffs, stewards and administrators of abbey estates, bailiffs and lawyers. Smaller properties

were purchased by local gentry, yeomen, townsmen and merchants. Local people accounted for nearly 43 per cent of the number of grants or purchases, but this accounted for only 18 per cent of the whole property (Wyndham, 1979, 69). After the initial distribution, however, land changed hands many times on forfeiture, attainder, death or sale, - giving opportunities for enlargement of rural holdings or for acquisition of country properties by townsmen. The release of so much land gave further opportunities of acquiring wealth and capital to those who already had the means - merchants, sheep farmers, clothiers and the local gentry (Dunning, 1978, 39-40). Already by this time land was widely recognised as the basis of wealth and status. The transfer of so many acres was to finally bring considerable advantages to the land owning classes, so fixing the social structure in favour of the aristocracy (Elton, 1962, 162, 257, Bettey, 1977, 51, 55, Morgan, 1979, 48, Palliser, 1982, 339-353).

Moreover there existed all those other factors of major importance that we have already observed in previous periods, and these were to have an increasing effect on social structures. These trends resulted in the production of a new and increasingly more divisive class system, with a widening gap between those with money, land and property and those without - the beginning of an industrial proletariat, and the problems arising from acute poverty and the increasing geographical mobility of the population.

Elizabethan village surveys contain details of landowners and land usage, details also of improvements in pastures and general fertility, together with reports of a profitable beef and store cattle industry. The independent farmers now had the financial reserves and opportunities to develop methods such as 'convertible husbandry' where crops and stock were rotated to promote fertility (Woodward, 1971, 323-31). In Somerset, from Leland's accounts, it is clear that these farmers also

produced crops of corn, beans, cider apples, fruit and teasels, and they imported beef cattle from Ireland for fattening before driving the improved animals on to markets in distant towns. Horses and pigs featured in the new farm economy and in Elizabethan England sheep were now valued for their mutton which was sold at markets, rather than, as previously, for just raw wool for the textile industry (Toulmin-Smith, 1964, Bettey, 1976, 157-59 & 1979, 401-4, Bowden, 1962, 13, 34, 61-62). Lord Ernle (1961) dated the beginning of the English Agricultural Revolution to the mid- eighteenth century but many now disagree with his dating. These critics point out that, even in the early sixteenth century, the structure of agricultural holdings allowed individual decisions on produce and management, and that, in consequence, new ideas were then first applied to agriculture (Harris, 1979, 82-89, Woodward, 1971, 323, Thirsk, 1967, 167). Perhaps the yeoman farmer in Somerset only may have rented his land; but, from probate inventories, wills and parish accounts, it is clear that this class enjoyed considerable prosperity. Indeed, there seems to have been sufficient wealth in the villages and countryside to enable much rebuilding and the modernisation of farmhouses in stone during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hoskins, 1953, 44, McDermott, 1982, 97). Most striking are the larger country houses and estates which are still to be found, largely on previous monastic sites around Taunton, Langport and the Polden Hills on land that formerly had been used as royal parks at North Petherton and Somerton, and on previously unenclosed waste or common areas (and on the site of some villages such as Crowcombe) in the Quantock Hills. Figure 14, which is based on the topographical descriptions of John Norden and Gerard of Trent in the early seventeenth century, shows the distribution of these properties in central Somerset (after Bates, 1900). Significant features of this spatial distribution will be considered later, but, at this juncture, it is worth noticing that none of these



■ Country houses

Fig. 14. Country houses in the early seventeenth century

substantial houses occur on the lowlands of the coast between Bridgwater and Axbridge except those on the former-monastic lands at East Brent.

Somerset did not experience as much depopulation and abandonment of villages as the previously open field arable parts of the English Midlands. This has been attributed to its much more diversified economic structure, particularly the rural textile industry and the mixed farming economy. Moreover, the demand for corn land in Somerset reversed the general trend towards pasture in the later sixteenth century (Betley, 1977, 24, Beresford, 1954, 146). Nevertheless, incidences of poverty and vagrancy continued to be reported (Page, 1911, 304, 309. In the west and south of the area, however, the records show that both country houses and deserted sites existed, though the co-existence of these two features do not necessarily prove a causal connection (see Figure 12); on the lowlands no large country houses and parks occur, but there do exist many small settlement sites where the date and reason for desertion has not yet been established. Clearly much more research on the local circumstances, economy and land management is required (Aston, 1985, 9-10).

Towns and trade

Wide-spread depression in trade and, in particular, in the textile industry affected the whole of the country from c1530 until the end of the century. The production and export of woollen cloth declined, affecting the growth of textile towns and villages, and giving rise to much loss of income and poverty (Brenner, 1961/2, 232, Kerridge, 1979, 17). This situation arose partly through inflation caused by wars and government overspending and partly through foreign competition from Spain. Bowden has suggested that, although enclosures had made pasturing easier with the new breeds of sheep introduced for their long staple wool fibres, in effect this wool was inferior in quality and trade

had been lost against wool from the Iberian peninsula (Bowden, 1956, 44). This view, however, is now disputed; direct competition from Spanish woollen cloth and price cutting is thought to have caused the loss of trade (Mann, 1971, 53). In consequence many towns lost some of their population and buildings fell into decay (P.R.O. Mss HENRY VIII, 531. Leland described decaying towns and burgages, particularly in Bridgwater, and it became necessary to open almshouses in the town for the destitute (Dilks, 1927, 35). But, other reasons for urban decay have also been advanced. For example, those more favourably situated on trade routes competed with old established towns with borough charters - which could no longer maintain a monopoly on trade. Towns were affected by the new mobility - the in-migration of landless labourers and the unemployed population of the surrounding countryside. Moreover, for reasons of income and status, merchants tended to transfer capital from town to countryside as houses and land came on the open market (Brenner, 1962/3, 273 Toulmin-Smith, 1964, 162-63, Bridbury, 1981, 1-24).

In central Somerset, reports of decay in the harbours is contradicted by the report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into Ports in 1559-65 (Bettey, 1976, 157-59). These reported investigations found a thriving trade at Bridgwater and at a number of smaller ports along the Bristol Channel: Watchet, Dunster, Porlock, Kilve, Minehead, Highbridge and Axewater are named. Cattle imports from Wales and from Ireland for fattening featured prominently and it is possible that the trade in animals and, to some degree, other goods may have compensated for the loss of the textile exports. Writers have also commented on the continuing surge of rebuilding in stone both of houses and of municipal buildings. This generally seems to have begun in the late fifteenth and continued through into the sixteenth (Page, 1911, 210, Hoskins, 1953, 44-59 & 1977, 163).

It is significant that, primarily, these new buildings were for lay purposes: the construction or rebuilding of churches had ceased and wills show no further bequests for ecclesiastical purposes (Weaver, 1905). The regional economy of Somerset may have been aided, unintentionally, by the Tudor policy which encouraged the production and export of grain for direct financial gain. But, in the latter part of Elizabeth's reign, a growing demand for corn land for this purpose and for fattening beef cattle reversed the trend towards pasture. Evidence exists - in the Midlands at least - of landlords having to search for tenants to occupy vacancies on enclosed arable land intended for corn growing (Beresford, 1970, 146, Bridbury, 1974, 540, Page, 1911, 304, Bettey, 1977, 24, Palliser, 1982, 348). Later in the century, however, the woollen textile trade in the western counties was to slowly recover. Now we find that undyed broadcloths were produced for the home market and especially for export to Antwerp through Bristol and Exeter (Ponting, 1971, 32).

Social attitudes and changes

Nevertheless, even if central Somerset did not experience the worst of the troubles of unemployment and poverty, clearly it was affected by the political and social developments and the changing ideologies of the country as a whole. Government had now moved away from a feudal pyramid with the King as head of state but without all-embracing power. The Tudor state turned out to be much more centralised, particularly after the Reformation of 1536 which enabled Henry VIII to remove the privileges of church courts and to assert royal authority. Dissatisfaction with the church, the loss of foreign trade and a general desire to escape foreign domination in church and economy resulted in support for the Crown and a more widespread concept of English national sovereignty.

At the same time, historians have noted the rise of the power of Parliament and the creation of a constitutional monarchy with the law in the hands of king, lords and commons (Elton, 1962, 114, 160, 167). Centralised government control became much more obvious in official attempts to control the economy and the lives and actions of the ordinary people. This can be seen in the various commissions and Acts of Parliament dealing with the numerous problems of the time: land enclosures, the loss of arable land, unemployment, poverty and vagrancy. Nevertheless, these efforts at central state control were to enjoy only limited success. In the prevailing conditions of inflation and financial interest it was profitable to enclose land. For this reason the government's efforts under Thomas Cromwell were opposed by the landed and moneyed faction (Elton, 1973, 98). In particular, the Statute of Artificers, 1563, which attempted to deal with ensuing social problems by the formation of apprenticeships and by wage fixing and Cromwell's famous Poor Law of 1537 (28 Henry VIII c6), laid down the basis for some sort of rudimentary national welfare system. Some observers, however, have accused the Tudor Government of acting only when crisis threatened and then doing little, leaving the problem to be dealt with by parochial authorities. Certainly the Poor Laws of 1536, 1597 and 1601 reveal the existence of much poverty in towns and rural areas, but the Government placed the problem and the cost squarely on the parish to house and provide work for the paupers and vagrants. Poor boxes were instituted in churches, a few bequests for the building of almshouses and roads are found in wills but the problems are best revealed in the many local accounts of the churchwardens and overseers (Elton, 1962, 259-61, Bettey, 1977, 51-58).

There has been much discussion in the academic literature as to the underlying causes for the changes in the management of land and property and the ensuing economic and social developments. Some

researchers attribute the situation as it had evolved in the sixteenth century purely to economic and demographic causes, to the economic breakdown of the demesne system after the Black Death, to the rise of monetarism and opportunism and, during the sixteenth century, to an increasing population and a rising demand for land (Cipolla, 1976, 200, Kerridge, 1979, 17). The general increase of population throughout England has been estimated from tax returns, land surveys and, after their inception, the parish registers. Some writers link this growth to Malthusian ideas that moderate land rents and food prices allowed earlier marriage whilst, at the same time, there was a reduction in the incidence of epidemics (Brenner, 1961/2, 232-35). Others argue convincingly that the population increase itself stimulated growth in general and directly influenced the economy by providing more workers and more mouths to feed. (Palliser, 1982, 339, Blanchard, 1970, 147).

Following the destruction of the peasant class with its serfdom and the system of traditional grazing rights the gradual transfer from feudalism to capitalism only became possible after the emergence of a new set of landholding systems and class relations. In this new situation a changing set of class relations evolved. Power was now in the hands of a landowning class but the old struggle between producers and non-producers continued (Brenner, 1976, 30-75, Butlin, 1978, 122). Rural workers were now employed in industry and no longer had any affiliation with the land, and these are envisaged by some commentators as the developing proletariat of the sixteenth century and major contributors towards the subsequent revolt against authority (Sharp, 1980, 7-8).

The economic and social conditions of sixteenth century England show a wide variety of wealth and poverty, privilege and underprivilege. Even in a small area such as central Somerset it is difficult to assess fully all the conditions and the full significance of emerging spatial

patterns. It is clear that different types of control at the end of the sixteenth century had given rise to quite different spatial structures compared to those existing at the time of the Domesday Survey (see Figure 3). As mentioned above, large country houses and parks surrounded by small farms and hamlets now existed in the south and west of the study area and at the eastern end of the Polden Hills.

On the flood plains of the Brue and Parrett rivers and in the clay belt near the coast a different pattern of management and social class seems to emerge by the end of the seventeenth century. No great houses or parks are noted. Here the land had never been in ecclesiastical ownership or control. The lay owners, minor gentry, held much of the land up to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Here, compared with the south and west, a quite locally distinctive system of land management, economy and social strata had evolved

A third separate, but interconnected system of economy and social structure may be found in the towns, ports and the larger textile centres where merchants, clothiers, traders and owners of industrial establishments formed a middle class and labour was contributed by urban and rural landless labourers.

Central Somerset, therefore, appears to have entered the seventeenth century with marked regional contrasts in its social and spatial structure. In Elizabethan England, whatever their circumstances, the contemporary people felt that conditions had now changed and that the old economic and social order had gone for ever (Bridbury, 1974, 556). The overall social structure was described by sixteenth century contemporaries as divided into four principal strata or levels made up of "gentlemen, citizens, yeomen artificers and labourers." The prevailing social milieu of the time accepted these divisions but mobility - geographical, financial and social- was allowed to those who could obtain and use opportunities to gain wealth and property and so to

climb in social scale. The enterprizes of Drake and Raleigh were common knowledge and the end of the century saw the first attempts to settle colonists in the new world (Elton, 1962, 250). Men now looked outwards and to the future.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

This study has attempted to review changes in the human geographies of central Somerset over five centuries and the changes from a feudal economy and social structure to a capitalist monetary society. The research has focussed on the very small region of central Somerset and conditions and changes in this particular restricted area have been compared or contrasted from time to time with the prevailing situation in the rest of England. In Somerset, as in England generally, comparisons of the economic and social conditions of the late eleventh century and of the way of life for the ordinary people in their everyday activities at the end of the study period, the late sixteenth century, show that, by this later date, the manorial and feudal system had virtually vanished. The beginnings of 'modern' English society are apparent in the economic and social systems which had now come into existence and in the growing concept of the importance of personal property. The increasing central power of the state is most noticeable.

Because of a number of special local factors central Somerset experienced its own peculiar type of development towards the capitalist system. First, the county was fortunate in having large areas of land which could be reclaimed during the early middle ages and in the activities of the large, wealthy and powerful ecclesiastical authorities who controlled much of the reclamation. These activities increased the acreage of pastoral land on which the future livestock economy was to be based. Reclamation, for the various reasons that have been outlined, resulted in larger numbers of landholders paying rent which, at the same time, effectively brought more freedom from the traditional manorial ties and duties. The pasturage of sheep provided a basis for the wool and cloth industries which, with the associated marketing and

export of wool textiles produced, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, much of the wealth within the region.

It is now clear that a widespread desire for freedom of action and production was evident before the catastrophe of the Black Death. And so it was to turn out that the vacant holdings and the decay of the monastic demesne system created the context for many more opportunities for independent farmers - in particular for sheep rearing - and these were seized readily. Moreover, useful and good routes for communication and trade on the rivers and along the coast were soon developed and overseas links were forged. The market towns, and those river and sea ports founded by charter in the early middle ages, prospered and their burgesses enjoyed a special status and freedom from feudal duties and dues hitherto unknown. Somerset became one of the foremost counties in England for the production of woollen textiles. The progressively evolving monetary system was to produce a new division of the social classes; and the principal contrasts lay between those with land and wealth and those who had neither. In many respects, Somerset was exceptional in the amount of monastic land and property which had come on to the market by the mid-sixteenth century, resulting in an almost complete and wholesale change in the management and control of the countryside. At the same time, the new self-conscious middle and industrial working classes had emerged and these were to be found in the towns and textile villages.

This prosperity and the patterns and processes of change in the countryside did not occur everywhere, even in an area only twenty to thirty miles across. Noticeable regional differences came into existence. First, not all parts of the region were able to take advantage of the new land reclamation schemes; in some hilly and agriculturally marginal areas land reclamation could never have been a practicable proposition. In heavily cultivated manors, such as Taunton

Deane, there was not much scope for enlargement of plots because almost all the available land was already in use. Scholars have attempted to define specific areas of prosperity using the incidence of rebuilding of farmhouses and churches as the surrogate measure, but much more work remains to be done before all the details can be worked out as they existed in space and changed over time. At the time of writing (July, 1987) detailed research is continuing on the revision of the Victoria County History of Somerset and parts of the study area have already been covered in the recently published volumes III, IV and V (Dunning, 1974, 1978 & 1985). This work will provide a most valuable source of further information and reference. Village records and surveys, though limited in their usefulness to their own locality, may take on a new significance when re-interpreted in a broader regional context (Harris, 1979, 82-89, Bridbury, 1974, 540). Over England as a whole a general decline in the woollen trade and in the economy of towns is reported, from time to time, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Postan, 1973, 443-46). Despite some conflicting evidence of good trade and prosperity from contemporary accounts, it seems that this trade depression was the general experience in central Somerset, as elsewhere. Clearly, there is a need for further research to identify the actual sequences of events. Especially is there scope for a thorough study of the Somerset woollen industry on the same lines as that recently completed for Wiltshire (Rogers, 1986, 16).

By the early seventeenth century a threefold spatial pattern of land management, economy and social class had emerged. These developments are worthy of further investigation, particularly as this division into distinctively different areas of landholding and social class, indefinite as it is, seems to hold good for perhaps a century and a half or more after the end of the period covered by the research on which this thesis is based, that is, until the mid-eighteenth century

with its new communications and industry. Indeed, in some respects, there are signs that traces of these same social and economic features still existed well into the early part of the present century.

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